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"SHE WOULD COQUETTE WITH HIM OVER HER FAN."

Was She a Coquette? or, A Strange Courtship.

BY HENRIETTA THACKERAY.

CHAPTER I.

RATHER DISHEARTENING.

"ANY ONE for Lynton?" shouted the porter, in a stentorian voice.

"Any one for Lynton?"

"Here you are!" answered a tall, fair young man who was standing

on the platform of Coxheath Station, waiting for the train that was already overdue. "Why do you want to know?"

"Well, it's only a small place, and we don't stop there unless there's passengers, sir," answered the man; "which doesn't very often happen, as there is a larger station a little further on, most of the people in that neighborhood use."

"I suppose I ought to have gone there, then?"

"Well, you would have found it almost as near, and far more convenient, sir, as there's not likely to be any conveyances at Lynton."

"Oh, for the matter of that, I can quite well walk," answered Christian Alsager; "and I dare say I shall be able to get some lad to carry my portmanteau."

"If it isn't too far, sir; but the station itself is quite away from any houses. Indeed, Lynton altogether is a wild, desolate sort of place and doesn't bear much of a name."

"Why not?"

"They say there's a good deal of smuggling thereabouts, sir; but perhaps it's just scandal, for no one has ever been caught, although the coast has been watched, too. However, I do know it's an ugly bit of coast, for a brother of my own was wrecked at Lynton, and when his body was recovered a week later there was an ugly gash in his throat that hadn't ought to have been there."

"Was every one on board the ship drowned?"

"No; all saved except poor Tom, and as you stand there, sir, he was murdered and cast into the sea— But here comes the rain. This end of the platform, if you please. First class, sir?"

Christian nodded, and found himself presently seated in a very comfortable carriage, with a handsome young girl of twenty for sole companion. Being a fair man himself, he was bound to admire ebony locks and black eyes; and, certainly even those who did not admire this style of beauty would have been forced to indorse the quotation that rose involuntarily to his lips:—

"She moves in beauty like the night
Of sunny climes and starry skies,
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes."

For the first few miles the young lady seemed absorbed in her book, and did not so much as lift those heavily-fringed eyes of hers; but the last page finished, she put it back into her bag, and then consulted her watch.

Christian saw an opening here, and seized it eagerly.

"Would you be good enough to tell me the time?" he said, with a courteous bow and smile. "My watch has stopped."

"Certainly!" she responded, with equal politeness. "It wants just ten minutes of four."

"And we get to Lynton at six, I think?"

"Somewhere about that time, I believe," replied the dark lady, observing him with more attention. "Are you going to Lynton, then?"

"Yes. You seem surprised."

"I was a little, for people don't often go to Lynton. It is such a very retired, not to say desolate, place one can hardly understand what should take anybody there."

Christian smiled.

"I am going on a visit to an uncle and some cousins, who live at Lynton."

She stared, and lost her presence of mind a little, it would seem, for she said, abruptly, "Do you mean to say you have been invited?"

Christian's smile developed into a hearty laugh.

"I should hope so. Why, is my uncle a very miserable sort of person, then? And do you know him?"

"I expect I do, for there is only one person at Lynton besides the rector, too young to have a nephew of your age, who would have visitors of your class; and as he has hitherto lived a most secluded, unsocial sort of life, your assertion took me entirely by surprise. Indeed, I hardly know how to believe even now that he has invited you."

Christian took a letter out of his pocket, and held it in front of her.

"Do you know that handwriting?" he said.

She nodded assent.

"Well, that is an invitation from Cyril Alsager, Esq., of the Manor House, Lynton, to spend a month with him and his family—"

"Oh, and how was it you cared to go?"

"Why shouldn't I care to go? My uncle Cyril and his children are the only relatives I have in the world, and I naturally long to make their acquaintance. Then there is a daughter, and if she is pretty and nice, one is sure to have a pleasant time."

"And if she shouldn't be pretty and nice?" suggested the lady.

"Even then I shall have had a change; and

after being shut up in an office for nine months, you don't know how one longs for a little fresh air and freedom."

"Are you obliged to be shut up in an office nine months in the year?"

"I was; but, thank goodness, that is all over now. My father thought that young men were the better for having an occupation, and therefore he tied up his money in such a way that I had only a very modest allowance—just enough to save me from starving, but not enough to keep me from working—until I was twenty-five. The consequence was that, directly my education was finished, I had to look out for employment; and it was not until my birthday, a week ago, that I knew what it was to have any enjoyment of life."

"I should call that a very cruel will," said the young lady, with great decision. "Why, the very best years of your life are over, and you have had no pleasure out of them."

"That is true. Still, my father knew that the Alsagers were a wild, impulsive, hot-tempered race, who needed discipline, and wanted to make sure that I should use my fortune wisely when I came into it."

"And do you think his precaution has had the desired effect?"

"That time will prove, I suppose," he answered, smiling. "But I must really apologize for boring a stranger with my family history. I am not apt to be so expansive, I assure you."

"But it is so nice to be able to be frank," she answered, sighing and flushing. "To have nothing to conceal, and no necessity to weigh your words before you utter them, is delightful."

She spoke with a sort of passion that surprised Christian, who began to regard her with more interest than ever.

"I could not deceive if I tried," he said. "I doubt if I could keep a secret even if my life depended on it."

"But if somebody else's life depended on it—what then?" she asked, wistfully.

"Ah, that would be a different thing altogether. I would rather cut my tongue out than allow it to injure any one."

Her beautiful eyes were suddenly uplifted to his, softened by tears, as she said, very earnestly, "Will you take a piece of advice, Mr. Alsager?"

"What is it?"

"Instead of getting out at Lynton, go on to Bexley Heath, and take the first train back to London."

"What motive have you for giving me such advice? Am I likely to be in any danger at Lynton?"

"I don't know—probably not; but the Alsagers are strange people, whom it would be as well not to know. Mr. Alsager has a terrible temper and an obstinate will. The sons are like him—"

"And the daughter?" interrupted Christian—"what do you know about her?"

"As much as any one else, I daresay. But she never hardly goes out, and you might be six months in the neighborhood without seeing her."

"Is she pretty?"

"I am not a fair judge."

"Why?"

"Because she is not at all the style I admire, and one lady must never express her opinion of another to a gentleman, or he is certain to accuse her of jealousy."

"I will promise faithfully not to accuse you of anything, if you will give me your candid opinion of Miss Alsager."

"Personally, I suppose you mean?"

"Generally; mind, manners, and looks, in fact."

"I would rather not; and you will see her ere long, and be able to judge for yourself."

"Yes; only that forewarned is forearmed."

"You have been forewarned in one way, and you would not heed," she answered, excitedly. "What is the use, therefore, of giving you any further advice?"

"You forget that it would be very difficult for me to get out of this visit now. I have accepted the invitation, and could hardly write now and say that I had changed my mind because I had been warned against them by a strange young lady in a railway carriage."

"That would be blundering out of it!" she said, rather sharply. "Couldn't you find some excuse?"

"I might; but I am not sure that I want to do so. I have led such an uneventful life hitherto, that an element of danger or enterprise would tempt rather than frighten me. Besides, I am sure my cousin is charming. All the women of our family are handsome and sprightly."

"She may be handsome—that is a matter of taste; but she is not certainly at all sprightly," answered his companion, with a decision that was almost startling. "It is not possible she should be that."

"Why?"

"She leads such a wretched life, poor thing Mrs. Alsager died of it. The daughter is young and strong, and manages to live on; but what pleasure can there be in her existence?"

"Of course, I don't know all the circumstances. But you are a friend of hers, I presume?"

"Miss Alsager cannot be said to have any friends," was the quick reply. "I feel for her immensely; but nobody goes to the Manor House—Mr. Alsager would not like it."

"And yet he invited me."

"You are a relation, and there may be reasons," she said, half hesitatingly. "But if you were wise you would turn back."

"Not for the world now!" he answered, with a frank laugh. "You have excited my curiosity to such a degree that I feel quite eager to get to Lynton. I have led the most humdrum life conceivable for the last six years; but I feel myself on the brink of an adventure at last. A fair maid in distress would appeal to any one's sympathies; and I am sure Miss Alsager will be in my style, because you admit that you do not admire her particularly, for, you know, men look more to expression and animation than to fine features."

"At any rate you have been warned, and will have no one to thank but yourself for any misfortune that may befall you," she said, gravely and coldly. "And now, pray don't let us discuss the subject any longer. I feel as if I had been guilty of treachery in saying what I have said, but thought it was my duty."

"Has my uncle any particular vice that is known in the neighbourhood?"

"No," she answered. "I believe he is looked upon as eccentric only."

"And his sons?"

"That is another question. However, I will answer that. His sons are considered rather wild, I believe, but nothing worse."

"But wild in what way?"

"They ride horses nobody else will mount."

"Is that all?"

"All you need know. It is no affair of any one's if they choose to risk their lives out boating in stormy weather. Some men are naturally adventurous, and must have the excitement of peril, and I have always understood that there was a good deal of hot blood in the Alsagers."

"That was my father's theory; and I must own that I have felt it occasionally tingling in my veins with unpleasant heat. Still, I hope I have learnt self-control in all these years, although, under any great stress, I might not be able to answer for myself, perhaps, so strong are these hereditary tendencies."

"If you go to the Manor House you must try and help yourself," she replied, in a very significant tone. "Four hot tempers together would never do."

"I dare say I shall be able to manage among them," said Christian, smiling. "And if my cousin is nice, that will compensate for a good deal."

The young lady pouted demonstratively.

"It's a great pity you admit this into your calculations, for it might not be in Miss Alsager's power to make your visit agreeable."

Seeing she did not like the subject, Christian added, just to tease her, "But if she is handsome, it will make my visit agreeable only to look at her."

"And if she isn't handsome?"

"Perhaps she will be clever."

The young lady shrugged her shoulders disdainfully, and relapsed into silence, looking out of the window as if she were absorbed in the landscape through which they were hurrying at the full speed of an express train.

For half an hour she did not open her lips, and Christian felt bound to respect her mood.

Then she pointed to a line of stately hills in the distance, and said, "There is Lynton; it is the wildest country we have in the neighborhood. Take care not to be on the rocks in stormy weather, for a terrible thing happened there once. A girl was walking along the cliff with a lover, when a sudden gust of wind made her totter, and before he could catch her she had fallen over the precipice. There he found her an hour later, quite dead, and the shock drove him mad."

"I see, you are trying to frighten me now," said Christian, amused at her pertinacity. "Whatever happens, you will never feel yourself to blame, for you have certainly tried every way to keep me from going to Lynton. The whole responsibility, therefore, rests with me, and your conscience will be quite easy."

"Of course it is no affair of mine," she responded, with a shrug of her graceful shoulders, and took up her book.

Half an hour later the train stopped at Lynton Station, and Christian prepared to descend.

Holding his hat in his hand, he bade her good-day, and she responded by a slight inclination of the head, and that was all.

But just as the whistle sounded, he saw her bend forward, and examine him in a furtive, curious sort of way; and, lifting his hat again, he said, with a somewhat malicious smile, "Till we meet again!"

CHAPTER II.

KIND RELATIONS.

CERTAINLY rumor had not exaggerated the loveliness or wild picturesque beauty of Lynton. The coast for miles was girded by tall, jagged rocks, which, forming a sort of oval, made a natural bay, where the water was comparatively calm in the stormiest weather.

Christian could quite understand what facilities this would offer for smuggling, and wondered the Government did not have a Coast-guard station near.

"But that is their business, not mine," thought Christian, as he accosted the man who was station-master, porter, and general manager at the small station, where, except on market days, few passengers ever stopped.

"Could he get a conveyance to the Manor House?"

"No, sir; you can't indeed," answered the man, decidedly. "There isn't such a thing in the place—I mean for hire. Mr. Alsager keeps two or three horses, and if he knew you was coming I've no doubt there would be something here to meet you."

"Yes, it was very foolish of me not to write. But I had no idea it was such an out-of-the-way place when I started. I suppose, however, I can get a man to carry my portmanteau?"

"I don't know where, sir, at this time of a day, as they don't leave off work till six, and we've no loungers at Lynton. But I could carry it after the five o'clock train from Bexley Heath has passed, if you are in no great hurry."

"How long would it take to get from here to the Manor House?"

"Not more than an hour, sir."

"Very well, then, that will do," replied Christian, who wanted to pay Miss Alsager the compliment of dressing for dinner. "Will you

The man pointed out the road, adding, "There's another path along the cliff, sir, where you get a very fine view, but I should hardly advise a stranger to try it, for there's accidents, and the wind is always high at Lynton. However, it's just as you fancy, of course."

"I would rather be on the safe side, thank you," he answered, cheerfully, as he nodded to the man, and stepped out into the road.

The nearer he got to the Manor House, the more he regretted not having given his uncle due warning of his arrival. Mr. Alsager had told him he should expect him that week, but had no doubt counted upon his writing to fix a day, and might not care to be treated so uncereemoniously.

However, there was no drawing back now, and so taking his courage in both hands, he marched boldly up to the door, and knocked.

His summons was answered promptly by a forbidding-looking man, in a plain, dark livery, who held the door a little way open, and stared at him suspiciously through the aperture.

Christian felt that it was necessary to account for himself without a moment's delay, and said, with a gracious, careless air, "I am afraid my uncle did not expect me to-day. I ought to have written to tell him I was coming."

The man scrutinized him closely, and had an air of reconsidering the matter, for he allowed the door to open a little further, and the severity of his countenance was tempered by a faint smile as he said, "You are Mr. Christian Alsager, then?"

Christian nodded affably.

The door was opened entirely, and Burford observed, in an amicable tone, "No, you wasn't expected—leastways to-day, sir; but master will be very pleased to see you when he comes home, I am sure. Just at present he is out, and so are the young gentlemen."

"And Miss Alsager?"

"She is out too, sir, but I expect her home every minute. Will you step this way, sir? and, if you will allow me, I will get you a glass of wine. You look tired, and dinner isn't till seven."

Christian was feeling as if he required renovating, and, therefore, did not refuse the proffered civility.

Burford ushered him into the library, set him a chair, and then bustled off to get him refreshment.

"My uncle keeps a good cellar, anyhow," thought Christian, as he tasted the excellent sherry placed before him; and then he walked to the window, and looked about him.

Everything was beautifully kept and ordered.

The lawn was smooth and green, the flower-beds brilliant with bloom, the paths neatly weeded.

There was taste, too, as well as order in the arrangement of the garden and borders, and Christian's fine instincts were more than satisfied.

As he stood admiring the scene, an elegant little brougham drove quickly up to the door; there came a quick, impatient knock, succeeded rapidly by the sound of Burford's feet hurrying through the hall, and then he could not help hearing the following dialogue.

"Burford,"—excitedly—"has any one come?"

"Yes, miss—a gentleman—Mr. Christian Alsager."

"How very unfortunate! My father has not returned?"

"No; I don't expect him to-night," was the reply, significantly spoken; and then Christian fancied the man must have pointed warningly toward the library door, for she resumed in a different tone:

"Oh, well, it can't be helped; and, luckily, Mr. Christian belongs to the family, so that he will overlook any deficiencies. Send Mrs. Marsham to me up-stairs, and tell Mr. Christian I have returned."

"Very well, miss. Dinner will be at seven, as usual, I suppose?"

"Of course," she said; and then Christian heard the rustle of a silk dress on the stairs, and put his eye to the aperture of the door drawing back presently with an amused, satisfied expression.

Reaching the top of the stairs, she called down, "I will send Ma sham to Mr. Christian to show him his room, directly I have decided which he is to have. Will you tell him so?"

"Yes, miss."

And Burford came toward the library.

Christian had just time to get to the window and assume a negligent attitude before the man entered, and gave his message with an expressionless face, although he knew, of course that Christian must have heard the conversation between himself and his young mistress.

There was an interval of ten minutes, and then Marsham—a respectable-looking, elderly woman—presented herself, and led Christian up-stairs to a large oak-paneled chamber, which, if you had any imagination, you might easily suppose to be haunted.

Indeed, the gloomy magnificence of the dark furniture and regal-looking four-poster, with its crimson hangings, suggested this idea to Christian; and he said laughingly to his guide, "You must have a haunted room in an old place like this, and it has always been my great ambition to sleep in one. I hope I shall have a chance of seeing a ghost here."

"Well, sir, they do say there is one walks about the Manor House," she answered, quietly. "But I've lived with Mr. Alsager ever since Miss Mabel was born, and I've never seen it yet, so that I don't put much faith in such stories."

"Was there ever a murder committed here?"

"So they say, sir," she replied, with an incredulous air; "but the common people hereabouts are very superstitious, and because the Manor House is old and draughty, and the wind and the mice together fill it with strange noises, they talk about spirits. But, as I said before, I've never seen one; and when Mrs. Alsager was ill, I was about at all hours of the night, and should have come upon them for a certainty if there had been any."

"Was my aunt ill long, then?"

"For years, sir, I may say she was ailing; but it was only the last ten months we began to think her state dangerous, and then she was dying by inches, so to speak—and so patient and resigned, it was beautiful to see. If ever there was a good woman born into the world, it was Mrs. Alsager, sir; and it's a sad thing for poor Miss Mabel to be left without a mother just at her age."

"It is, indeed!" said Christian, so sympathetically, that Marsham looked at him with growing interest and approval. "But it must be a great comfort to her to have you with her; for a nurse is next to a mother."

"That is what Miss Mabel is always good enough to say, sir; and I am sure there is nothing I wouldn't do for her. Still, there's many times when, not being a lady like herself, I can't help her as I should wish."

"But I am sure she takes the will for the deed."

"I think she does, sir; for though Miss Mabel has a little sharp way with her at times, that people are apt to misunderstand, it is impossible to be kinder-hearted or more gentle than she is. You would hardly believe how much good she does among the poor, and yet not a soul knows it except myself."

"They don't tell?"

"She won't let them; and they are not sorry to obey her, because it answers their purpose. But that is true charity, sir, is it not?"

"Undoubtedly! How terribly they would miss her if she went away."

"True," replied Marsham, in a lower voice. "Still, that is what I am always wishing, for her sake, sir. It isn't exactly the home for a

of her, but he can't see that it is dull for her at Lynton; and she would rather die than complain. She ought to be among young folks, and have a little gayety and pleasure at her age, oughtn't she?"

"She sees no society, then?"

"No, sir. When master first came here to live he might have had as much company as he liked, but when people called upon him he did not return it, and so they soon left him to himself. Mistress was one of a large family, and felt this a good deal at first, but had such poor health later, that she would have been forced to stay at home, in any case, so that it really didn't matter. But, of course, it's a great disadvantage to Miss Mabel, and makes her very lonely."

Then she suddenly remembered herself, and added, "But I am keeping you, sir. Is there anything you would like?"

"Nothing, thank you; only that I should be glad to know when the man arrives with my portmanteau."

"It shall be brought to your room directly it comes, sir."

Christian handed her a half-a-crown for the man, and then, by the time he had refreshed himself by a plunge into the cold bath which stood ready prepared in his room, his luggage arrived, and he was able to dress for dinner before he left his room. He glanced into the library as he went down, and no one being there, strolled into the garden, and wandered about in a state of blissful delight, until the dinner bell rung.

In the hall his cousin was awaiting him, dressed elegantly in white, with a crimson rose in her bosom. As she advanced shyly, with a flush on her beautiful face, she said, "Is this a surprise to you, cousin Christian?"

He shook his head and laughed.

"I guessed who you were from the first."

"Then why didn't you take my advice?"

"Because it scarcely seemed disinterested; and, moreover, I knew, from ocular demonstration, that Miss Alsager was handsome and charming; and, therefore, whatever the gentlemen of the family might be, I was sure to have a good time."

She looked up at him rather wistfully as she took his arm and moved toward the dining-room.

"I am afraid it won't depend on Miss Alsager; she is not a very important person at the Manor House."

"She would be in my eyes."

"That would not do any good—rather the contrary; but, of course, having asked you to Lynton, my father will endeavor to make your stay agreeable. I only wanted to prepare you for rather a dull visit, for we see no company."

"I am very glad to hear it."

"I am afraid you are just saying this to reassure me."

"On my honor, I am not! To lie on the lawn basking in the sunshine, to be allowed to accompany you in your walks, is all I ask. You must remember that the country is a great treat to me, and a lady's society still greater."

"Really! how is that? I thought London men saw so much society."

"Not London men who are in offices," he answered, smiling. "When I got home at night, I was much too tired to care for balls, even if I had been invited, which I seldom was; for a clerk is not looked upon as a very great catch, and I never cared to talk about what I was coming into."

"I like people who don't talk," she said, with an appreciative air. "They are so much safer."

"Then you will like me," he answered, laughing; "for I have lived so much alone, that I have got out of the way of being loquacious or confidential."

"And yet you were tolerably frank in the train," she observed, with an arch glance.

"After I knew you."

"And when did you begin to know me?"

"As soon as you put down your book, and raised your face. You are exactly like the miniature I have of your mother when she first married."

"Have you that, really?" she inquired, with great eagerness. "And I have none!"

"We will make a bargain, Cousin Mabel—shall we? I will give you the portrait before I go away for a fair equivalent."

"For my portrait?"

"We shall see."

"I can't promise, cousin Christian; but, perhaps, by that time you will be in a more generous temper, and give it to me without exacting any return."

"I am afraid that the longer I stay, the more exacting I shall become," he answered, with a significance that brought the color into Mabel's face.

"You will make me afraid of you if you don't take care," she said.

"That will be only fair; I am dreadfully afraid of you."

She looked up at him in wistful inquiry; but as they entered the dining-room at this moment, and Burford was there, the further discussion of the subject was adjourned.

Never in all his life, that Christian could remember, had he passed such a delightful evening.

Mabel was as accomplished as beautiful, and sung him into the seventh heaven of delight. She knew all his favorite old songs, and rendered them with sweetness and expression, as well as with skill. But over "The Three Fishers" she broke down; and there was such a pathetic look in her young eyes, that he began to understand that there were mysteries at Lynton which weighed upon the poor girl's heart, and took all the sweetness out of her life.

What these mysteries were he could not, of course, divine; but resolved that, come what might, he would be her loyal friend and adviser, if she would suffer it; and if a tenderer feeling should grow up between them meanwhile, there would surely be no obstacle in the way of their happiness; for though no coxcomb, he could not help feeling pretty certain that his uncle had invited him there on purpose to fall in love with Mabel. This was his last waking thought as he turned his head luxuriously in the lavender-scented pillows, and slept the sleep of the weary.

For several hours he did not even stir, and then was roused abruptly by a dull, heavy thud against his door, such as might have been made by a drunken or fainting man.

This was followed by a silence so intense as to be actually startling, and thinking naturally that some one was needing assistance, Christian sprung out of bed in a moment, and hurried to the door. But he found this, to his surprise, locked on the outside, and after trying it two or three times without any result, went back to bed.

He listened for some time, but hearing nothing further to excite his suspicion, became drowsy again, and after awhile relapsed into his former deep sleep, from which he did not rouse until nearly eight o'clock.

Then he sprung out of bed, and opening the window, let in a flood of sunshine, and a great breath of salt air, which freshened him like a tonic, and brightened all his views of life as if by magic.

"What a shame to have slept so long!" he thought to himself, as he looked out on the dewy flowers and golden landscape. "I'll take care to be up betimes to-morrow morning, and have a long walk before breakfast."

As these reflections were passing through his mind, he heard Mabel's voice under his window, and listened eagerly for the sweet sound, which had begun already to thrill him strangely. She was saying, with a certain decision, "Anyhow, Walter, whether convenient or not, I hope you will behave like a gentleman. After all, it was papa's fault for not being more explicit."

"It's a confounded nuisance just now, too!"

growled Walter. "A week hence it wouldn't have mattered, but you know quite well we must be quiet for a few days."

"I know nothing about it, and wish to know nothing," she replied; "but, anyhow, I don't suppose Christian will interfere with you."

"Oh! if you are going to take him in hand, well and good," answered her brother with a disagreeable sneer. "We shall be otherwise engaged for the next few days, and anyhow I don't fancy he'd be our sort."

"I am sure he isn't a milksop, if that is what you mean," was the reply, in an indignant tone.

"Hallo! firing up already!" exclaimed her brother, with a repetition of the disagreeable sneer, which made Christian feel as if he should like to cuff Master Walter's head. "You're getting on pretty fast, my dear. Then at the risk of offending you, I am bound to say that I never knew a London clerk who wasn't a duffer when once he got down off his high stool. Now, I'll bet you what you like he couldn't shoot a barn door fowl, sitting, three yards beyond his nose; and as for boating, and swimming, and riding, and all that, we shouldn't like him to risk his precious life by attempting any thing of the sort."

"And, of course, if he hasn't Mr. Walter Alsager's various accomplishments, whatever others he may have, he can be no good!" retorted Mabel, with polite irony. "I shouldn't have thought that it was any extraordinary merit to be a good shot, or a fine rider and swimmer, when you learnt all these as soon as you could walk, and have been practicing ever since. And I expect Christian would find you quite as remiss in other ways, if you compared notes."

And then they passed out of hearing, having supplied Christian with some new reflections.

Mabel had defended him generously and bravely. At the same time he did not feel at all sure that she would not despise him in her heart if she found him deficient in those manly sports her brothers excelled in as a matter of course.

As far as swimming went, Christian was not afraid to compete with his cousins; but he had had no experience either of shooting or rowing, and felt he should be at a disadvantage there. However, he made up his mind to remedy these last deficiencies as quickly as he could, by utilizing his morning walks, and then, his toilet made, he descended to breakfast, rather curious for a sight of his uncle and cousins.

Mr. Alsager—a handsome, portly man, with white hair—was seated at the table, reading his newspaper, as Christian entered, and rose at once, and shook him cordially by the hand.

"Welcome to Lynton, my dear boy," he said. "I am sorry you didn't give us notice of your coming, though, because then we would have been at home, and you must have found it rather tiresome last night."

"Not at all, I assure you," replied Christian, with unmistakable sincerity. "I had a delightful evening."

"That's all right; then I needn't apologize further."

"No, indeed, and I am dreadfully afraid that I have put you to inconvenience by not writing to say what day I was coming."

"Not the least in the world, my dear fellow! You are one of the family, and take us as we are. But here come the lads. This is Tom,"—indicating the elder, who held out his hand, mechanically, without warmth—"and that is Walter. Do credit to Lynton air, don't they?"

"They look strong," answered Christian, with a chilliness that was natural after the coldness of his greeting. "I suppose it is very bracing here."

"The healthiest place in England," he answered, cheerfully. "Give us our coffee, May, love, and we will show Christian the sort of breakfast people eat when they live on the edge of a cliff, and take so much salt air into their lungs."

And the master of the Manor House, having served Christian most bountifully, filled up his

own plate with rump-steak, and fell to with a will. Christian was hungry; but his cousins' performances in this line fairly astonished him. Mr. Alsager explained that they were seldom at home for luncheon, and therefore took in a supply that would last until seven o'clock; but even allowing for this, Christian thought their appetites unusual, and did not wonder now at their stalwart proportions and great physical strength.

Having finished their meal, they left the room without any apology; and even without the intimation Christian had received, he would have understood that they wished it to be seen at once that they intended to take no part in his entertainment. Being such a milksop, an old man and a girl would amuse him very well, they no doubt argued, with that lordly depreciation of their sister's charms, mental and physical, which is common to brothers.

And assuredly he asked nothing better than to be left to Mabel's tender mercies; still, he could not help feeling piqued and humiliated by the inferences they drew, and thirsted to show his supercilious young relations that a London clerk could have a little pluck, whatever they might believe to the contrary.

"I am afraid I must write letters this morning," Mr. Alsager said, as he rose from the table in turn. "I am sure you will excuse me, Christian; for you have been brought up in a practical way, and know that duty must not be neglected. What will you do this morning?—for I want you to feel quite at home. Will you ride, row, or walk, or do nothing?"

"I think I should like to do nothing—in company," answered Christian, glancing toward Mabel. "The lawn looks very tempting."

"Supposing you spend the morning in the grounds—Mabel will be only too pleased to be your companion—and make your own plans for the afternoon? I want you to please yourself entirely, and feel free to come and go, as if this were your own house. I haven't very much spare time myself, and the boys look after the farming and all that sort of thing; but Mabel is always at leisure, and will show you all our sights."

Then he nodded his head with a benevolent air, and went off to his study.

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT SULTAN.

"I AM very sorry for you," said Mabel, laughing, "but it can't be helped; and I warned you you would have a bad time at Lynton."

"A bad time! I'm in clover!" replied Christian, gayly. "Uncle has made you over to me, to 'have and to hold' until the end of my visit; and what more could the most unreasonable mortal desire, so far as the present is concerned?"

"I predict that you will be sick of the very sight of me before a week is gone by."

"We shall see," he answered, oracularly.

"What is the programme for to-day?"

"That is for you to decide."

"Well, I suggest that you should bring some work onto the lawn, and I will read to you. I have some new books in my trunk. This afternoon, if you will, you shall teach me to row."

"Why?" she said, looking at him keenly.

"Because I want to learn. As far as riding is concerned, I can do the Rotten Row style of thing; but across country I dare say I should not be a success, so perhaps you'll take me over some fences to-morrow and get me into practice."

"Christian," she said, abruptly, "did you overhear Walter's conversation with me this morning?"

"Yes," he answered, laughing; "I did. I could not help it; but don't suppose that I am offended, Mabel. I can quite understand that a young athlete like Walter should despise anything approaching to a milksop, and of course he has yet to learn tolerance and hu-

mility. I have had to work instead of play so far; but perhaps in an emergency Master Walter would find that his 'milksop' cousin had as much courage as himself, and rather more judgment."

"I don't doubt that for a moment," returned Mabel, with flattering readiness. "But won't you go out, cousin, and I will join you in about half an hour? In spite of papa's lofty, masculine way of gauging my household duties, you will understand, after what you have seen this morning, that it is no light task to provide for such magnificent trenchermen as my people are. But Burford is such a valuable ally, I sha'n't be long, and then for the rest of the day shall be quite at your disposition."

Sport was an instinct with the Alsagers, and it seemed as if it had only lain dormant in Christian for want of the conditions that call it forth, for he surprised Mabel by his aptitude.

Every morning he rose early and went off to the beach, where he fired away at the sea-gulls with rapidly-increasing effect. He was determined not to disgrace himself on the first of September if he could help it; but he was equally anxious to keep his purpose secret from both Tom and Walter, who he could see disliked and suspected him. They were barely civil; but being constantly out, Christian saw so little of them, it did not matter whether they were amiable or not. So far, they had not shown any open hostility; but this was not to last. His cousins had just tolerated him for a while, it would seem; but now their patience was at an end, and they would leave no stone unturned to render Lynton too hot to hold him. There was one thing only they left out of their calculations, and that was the fact that Christian was an Alsager himself, and might have as much determination as they.

The campaign opened in this way. Christian was awake one night, just as the half clock was striking one, by the touch of an icy hand on his cheek, and springing up saw a tall, shadowy figure, in a long winding-sheet, standing at the foot of his bed.

There was just light enough to see the outline of this figure and the ghastly face, out of which shone a pair of preternaturally large, hollow eyes; and its get-up was so good that if Christian had been a nervous man there was no telling what might have happened.

But he was not a nervous man, and, moreover, although he had been roused out of his first sleep, had all his wits about him, and shaking his fist at the apparition, said, resolutely, "Look here, Walter; your tomfoolery will cost you dear some of these days. If I weren't sure it was you I should put a bullet through you just for the fun of the thing, you know, for one can't hurt a ghost if he is made of air; but as I am sure it is you, the next time you play me such a foolish trick I'll knock you down if I can; and if I can't manage that, I'll do you all the injury in my power. Do you understand?"

A hollow groan was the sole response to this adjuration, and Christian was on the point of springing out of bed, when the specter vanished suddenly somewhere into the gloom; and though the young man lighted a candle and searched the room thoroughly, he could not find any sign of its, or, rather, his, mode of exit.

Still, this did not shake his belief in his own theory, especially as he had often heard of secret slides in oak-paneled rooms so cleverly contrived that none but the initiated could hope to fathom the mystery. It was more than probable that he had passed over the very spot where the supposed ghost had made its entry again and again, and that he was sneering behind the panel all the while.

"However, he can't say that he frightened me," was Christian's consolation; and certainly he was so satisfied that his cousins had been trading on the family traditions for his benefit, that he had not so much as a thrill of fear or a pang of doubt.

His investigation finished, he went quietly

back to bed, and slept without further molestation until morning.

He hurried a little over his dressing, in order to catch both his cousins at table, and noticed that they glanced toward him as he took his seat.

"How did you sleep?" inquired Mr. Alsager, lowering his newspaper for a moment, and looking straight at Christian.

"Beautifully!" replied his nephew, cheerfully.

Tom and Walter exchanged furtive glances. Christian was down upon them in a moment.

"You are too tall for the family ghost, Walter!" he said, laughing, as if he enjoyed the joke. "Upon my honor, you looked seven feet high! However, I don't bear you any ill-will, for I soon got to sleep again; but" (with quiet determination) "you had better, perhaps, not try it again, because, when one is half asleep and half awake, one is hardly responsible for one's actions, and I have a pistol handy."

"I don't know what you mean about the family ghost," returned Walter, sullenly; "but you may fire at me as often as you like for half a crown a go!"

"I'll wait for the partridges, thank you," replied Christian, coolly. "I prefer to kill what I can eat! It would be rather difficult to dispose of your remains!"

Walter sneered visibly, but said no more; and as Mabel looked pale and troubled, Christian dropped the subject. She questioned him eagerly and closely after breakfast, but knowing that it would only worry her to know the exact truth, Christian took the tone that her brothers had played him a little trick, and affected not to see the serious side of the question.

It had been planned the day before that he and Mabel were to ride that morning; but when the horses were brought round to the door he found a powerful black animal, called Sultan, substituted for the one he generally rode, and was prepared to accept the exchange without any comment, when Mabel turned sharply to the groom, and said, "Why haven't you given Mr. Christian the horse he always rides?"

"Mr. Walter wanted Brownie, miss," answered the man, respectfully.

"Then you should have told him it was bespoken."

"I did, miss; but he said Sultan would do as well for Mr. Christian, unless—"

"Go on. Unless what?"

"Unless he was afraid of a horse with a little spirit, and then had better not ride at all!"

This was enough for Christian, we may be sure. He cared little enough what Walter said or thought of him, but he would rather have died than that Mabel should fancy he was a coward. Moreover, he was not afraid of Sultan. He remembered quite well having heard one of his cousins say that in experienced hands Sultan always behaved well, but that once allow him to see you were afraid, and he would break your neck if he could.

As he gathered up the reins, Sultan glared round at him, showing the whites of his eyes; but when he felt Christian give a little shake at the curb, as much as to say, "Mind what you are about," he became quiet, waiting, with almost human slyness and malice, for the weak moment that would give his enemy into his power.

But Christian was as watchful as he was, having a very decided objection, for several reasons, to being thrown.

Finding he had no fool to deal with, Sultan behaved very well for a while; and Mabel, who had been on tenter-hooks all the first part of the time, began to breathe more freely, and finally became quite reassured.

But Sultan was only biding his time, it would seem, and meant to make a struggle for victory before he owned himself beaten. They had ridden about fourteen miles, and were just turning homeward across a rough, bleak moor, when Christian felt the animal shiver under

him, and, with a squeak, he gave a great plunge forward and bolted.

Christian had expected this all along, and was neither surprised nor dismayed. All he had to do for the time was to keep his seat, if he could—and Sultan's tricks made this a somewhat difficult task,—and then, when the brute's ardor was beginning to cool, show him pretty decidedly what he might always expect when he indulged in such vagaries.

So he stuck to his seat, although Sultan took everything in his way, and made a good many playful starts and plunges, his great object being, evidently, to unseat his rider.

Mabel reined in her horse, and waited with her heart in her mouth, very uncertain as to which of the two would gain the victory.

A good half-hour elapsed, and then Christian rode back to her quite cool and calm, although Sultan quivered under him, and his mouth and breast were flecked with foam and blood.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting," was all Christian would have said; but Mabel could not let the matter pass so lightly.

"How did you manage to stop Sultan?" she said.

"He stopped of his own accord."

"How was that?"

"He was tired; for when he had done galloping for his own pleasure, I made him go on for mine, so that now he will be glad to go home steadily. I don't believe Sultan is vicious—he is only obstinate; and if once you can conquer that, you make him your slave. See! I have no need to let him feel the rein, he is so submissive now."

Mabel looked at him almost affectionately.

"I am glad you have conquered," she said.

"So am I. I shouldn't have liked Walter to make a fool of me too easily."

She colored and bit her lips; but she did not attempt any denial.

She, no doubt, knew a good deal more on this subject than he did.

The groom looked surprised when Christian rode jauntily into the yard, leading Mabel's horse (she having alighted at the front door), and got down out of his saddle without making any remark.

"Did Sultan carry you well, sir?" he ventured to say.

And Christian responded, cheerfully, "Very well, indeed. There's nothing the matter with the brute if he's managed."

No remark was made at dinner about the ride; but Walter was a little more sullen than usual, Christian thought—a fact which concerned him little enough.

He could not help thinking, however, that he had risen in Tom's estimation by his little adventure, for he was extraordinarily gracious for him, and helped him to wine with his own hand.

However, this state of things did not last long. The next morning Tom was so surly and unapproachable Christian could not get a civil answer out of him. It seemed as if his first impulse had been to admire Christian's courage and determination, but on reflection he was inclined to resent these qualities, because they were likely to interfere with his plans.

Walter was equally sulky; and though Mabel, with gentle tact, exerted herself more than ever to make the meal pleasant and sociable, her brother's incivility could not be disguised.

As for Mr. Alsager, he was always cordial and pleasant; and yet somehow, Christian liked him less than his cousins on the whole, for he could never get over the feeling that he was the moving spirit, after all, and that the others only followed his lead. To be equally guilty, but more capable of hiding his guilt under a mask of insincerity and affected heartiness, was no advantage, rather the contrary, and made Christian feel far more insecure really than if Mr. Alsager were as gruff and quick-tempered as the two lads.

But what could not be cured must be endured, and somehow the only possible remedy for all this was one which it never occurred to

him to put into execution, and that was taking leave of Lynton and the inhabitants of the old Manor House, and returning to town.

"I cannot leave Mabel," he admitted to himself. "I would rather run any risks than be parted from her."

As it was the fashion of the house to make him entirely depend upon her for amusement, Christian had a good deal of the society which grew to him daily sweeter and sweeter, precious and more precious.

She was one of those women who never tire you.

Her moods changed as did her beauty, and she had so many surprises, that you were kept in a constant state of expectation.

For an hour, perhaps, she would lie back on the garden seat, pale, pensive, and silent, watching the sunshine as it glinted through the leaves overhead; and then, suddenly, she would turn, sparkling, to meet his gaze, and coquette with him over her fan, and laugh and talk as gayly as if she had never known a care.

But, perhaps, that very afternoon he would enter the drawing-room unexpectedly and find her in tears; although when he asked the cause, and begged to know if he could do anything to help or comfort her, she would burst out laughing in his face, and declare she was crying because her new dress did not fit, or the hat she had ordered had not come home.

That these frivolous excuses were invented to keep him at bay Christian knew quite well.

Mabel was the last woman in the world to cry because her dress did not fit, and had no cause to do so assuredly, for the worst dress-maker in England could not have marred the grace of that perfect figure.

But the day would come, he thought, when, for all her loyalty, she would be glad to confide in him; and by patient waiting and unexpressed sympathy he must show himself worthy of her trust when the proper time came.

The morning after Christian's adventure with Sultan, he had retired to the garden-seat where he usually waited for Mabel, when just as he was opening his book to while away the dull half-hour that generally intervened between their parting at the breakfast table and their meeting under the trees, he saw her come rapidly out of the house with a flushed, and disturbed face.

"Christian," she said, in a quick, breathless voice, "you must manage to amuse yourself alone this morning. Papa wants me to make up some accounts." Her lips quivered as she spoke, and Christian saw that there had been a painful scene after his departure—a fact he was not surprised at as two or three times already he had noticed that Mabel's championship of him had cost her dear. Whether she really had to make up accounts, or this was an excuse, made no difference. He was certain that Mabel had been crying, and it was more than probable that the trouble had come to her through him.

This conviction made his eyes and voice both very tender, as he looked straight into her eyes and said, "Something has happened to annoy you, Mabel. Won't you tell me what it is?"

She turned her head aside from his eager, questioning glance, and answered evasively, "People must have their troubles in this world, Christian. I cannot expect to be more fortunate than the rest."

"But you are so young, Mabel, you might reasonably expect to have a few happy years."

She sighed under her breath, and then smiled at him brightly the next moment.

"Perhaps my happy years are to come. I should rather have them to look forward to, after all. The present is so soon over—the future is always a pleasant anticipation. Besides," hesitatingly, "I could never be happy here."

She broke down fairly for the moment, and Christian could hardly resist the impulse that tempted him to draw her close to his heart, and comfort her after a tender fashion of his own.

"Sometimes," she presently added, "my life here seems unendurable—and I wish, with all my strength, that I were dead!"

"But surely, Mabel, that is not the only way out of the difficulty?"

"Yes, it is. If you knew all!" she answered; and then, as if regretting her frankness, added, quickly, "You see, cousin, I have got the blues. I am afraid I don't much relish passing the whole morning in papa's study over accounts, instead of lolling about in the sunshine, as I have been wont to do of late. People get spoiled so soon, you know."

"Your preference is a very natural one, and one that most people would share," he said. "I know how I used to hate the office on a fine day like this, and how difficult I found it to settle to my work. But can't you get off your accounts, or bring them out here where I may help you?"

"Oh, no!" she said, with a sort of terror; "papa would be so angry. Besides, I would rather do them alone; I shall get on faster. Thank you all the same."

"Anyhow, we can have our ride this afternoon, Mabel?"

"I am afraid not," she answered, with an embarrassed air; "I am not sure that I shall have finished; and if I have, the horses will all be out, so that we could not ride in any case."

"The horses will all be out?" he repeated, in a tone of surprise. "I thought no one ever rode Firefly but yourself."

"You forget that exceptions prove the rule," she returned, with increased confusion. "Anyhow, I sha'n't ride him this afternoon; and I mustn't stay any longer," she concluded, abruptly, and darted away.

Christian might have been astonished at the suddenness of this movement, only that he caught sight of Tom standing in the porch smoking, and understood that that young gentleman was keeping guard, and had some motive for wishing to keep the cousins apart, at any rate, for the present.

This view of the case was confirmed to Christian by the timid, deprecatory manner in which poor Mabel slipped past her brother into the house, while the sound, if not the words, of Tom's angry reproaches reached him, and filled him with indignation and disgust. What new move was this—and what did it portend?

Hitherto they had, so to speak, thrown Mabel into his arms; now suddenly, either from caprice or expediency, they resented the favor she had shown him, and just as her society had become the great pleasure of his existence, seemed disposed to withdraw it.

No doubt they hoped to drive him away from the Manor House; but Christian was resolved not to be driven away.

So far, he had managed to keep upon decent terms with those two young savages; but endurance has its limits, and though patient, he was no coward, and meant to call them to account if they urged him any further.

Meanwhile, he kept on guard too.

It was evident to him that something was going on; but he could not understand the meaning of this last move.

Keeping his eye on the window, he saw, presently, Mabel's pretty, dark head bent over the desk in the library—to his surprise, be it said, for he had looked upon this excuse as a mere fabrication of hers to save his feelings.

However, an hour later she was still there, and apparently so absorbed in her occupation that she did not even glance his way, as he had hoped she might presently be tempted to do.

Meanwhile, his uncle and cousins came from the house, booted and spurred. The horses were brought round—Walter, as the lightest weight, mounting Firefly, Tom taking Sultan; and the three men rode off, laughing and talking loudly, although it struck Christian that this was for his benefit, as they were more noisy than merry, after all.

He waited until they had been gone quite ten minutes, and the echo of their horses' feet

had died away, and then went straight to the library, and tried the door.

To his surprise, it was locked on the inside. "Mabel," he said, softly, "mayn't I come in?"

No answer.

"Ma'ell!" he repeated, in a louder key, and turned the handle noisily.

Still no reply.

This was very extraordinary, and only that he had seen her still there when he passed the window a few seconds before, he would have fancied she had left the room suddenly.

He called her once more, with the same result, and was beginning to feel somewhat irritated at her silence, when he heard her cross the room, and presently a little slip of paper rustled under the door, and touched his foot.

He stooped, and possessed himself of it eagerly, and read the following lines:—

"Please, please go away directly. I have promised not to speak to you, and people are listening. I ask you as a great kindness to leave me quite alone all day."

Of course, he could not resist this appeal, and yet was conscious, too, of a slight feeling of resentment as he moved away, and went back to his seat under the trees, and the perusal of the *Times*.

He thought himself sure of Mabel's company at luncheon, at any rate, and was profoundly disgusted when he found, on entering the dining-room, that the cloth was laid for one only.

"Is Miss Alsager ill?" he threw out as a feeder to Burford, knowing, of course, that she was nothing of the kind.

"I don't know, sir."

"I wish you would ask," continued Christian, impatiently. "If she isn't coming, you may clear away, for I don't care to sit down alone."

"I know she isn't coming, sir," said Burford, quietly.

"Then why didn't you say so at once?"

"You didn't ask me that question, sir. You asked me if she was ill," answered Burford, respectfully enough as to tone, though there was an insolent expression in his eyes.

Christian rose from table, pushing his chair away with an irritable gesture, and walked out, while Burford drank his health in a tumblerful of sherry, and then put out his tongue in a vulgar but expressive way, as he began to clear away the untasted meal.

Christian lingered about the grounds for a couple of hours, hoping always Mabel would find it possible and pleasant to join him presently; but when four o'clock struck, and he saw the graceful head still bent over Mr. Alsager's desk, he began to understand that Mabel's prohibition was meant to last all day, and disappointed and angry both, he took his gun, and marched off to the beach.

He was passing along a narrow path that skirted the Rectory grounds, when he found himself suddenly confronted by the rector, a tall, pale young man, who looked as if his life were passed in mortifying the little flesh still left upon his bones.

Christian was very courteous; and as they were at such close quarters, it seemed natural to raise his hat, as he moved aside to let the other go by.

To his surprise, instead of passing, the rector placed himself right in the middle of the path, and said, gravely, "Could you spare me a few minutes, Mr. Alsager?"

Christian forgot his breeding, and stared.

The rector went on, with a faint smile. "I am afraid you will think I am taking a great liberty; but I have felt for some time that it was my duty to speak to you if I got a chance, and, therefore, when I saw you coming across yonder field alone, I came out and waylaid you."

Christian bowed, as there was nothing to say, and waited for further enlightenment.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind following me into the house," continued the rector, in a more cautious tone. "What I have to say is for your ear alone, and we cannot tell who may be hidden behind the trees."

"I am quite at your orders," replied Christian, and followed him, wondering, through a little side gate that led into the Rectory gardens.

The rector opened the low glass door leading into his library, and politely motioned Christian to enter.

When they were both inside, he closed the window again carefully, opened the door to see if any one was in the hall, and then, seating himself near Christian, said, in a low voice, "I have a very difficult task to perform, and one which is, believe me, extremely repugnant to my feelings; but when it is a question of duty, our feelings ought not to be allowed to influence us—ought they?"

"I wish he would come to the point," thought Christian, who was racking his brain for some explanation of the other's extraordinary conduct.

And as if he understood what was passing through his companion's mind, the rector added, "I wanted to warn you against your relatives at the Manor House, Mr. Alsager. I am sure you must have gone there in ignorance of their real character and reputation."

This was perfectly true; but Christian did not choose to admit it.

"And it is only right you should be told," the rector went on, "that they are lawless and unprincipled people, who will compromise you fatally unless you take care."

"I don't understand you."

"Then I suppose I must speak plainly. The young men are bad enough, in all conscience; but, in comparison with the sister—"

"Hush!" interrupted Christian, flushing with anger. "I cannot allow one word against my cousin Mabel. I know her to be one of the purest and best of her sex."

The rector looked at him, and sighed.

"Ah! I was afraid my warning would come too late; but even if I had known this, it was my duty to speak. She is so beautiful, so bewitching, so full of coquettish wiles, that you must needs have learnt to love her."

"You are jumping at conclusions," responded Christian, coldly. "I did not say I loved her; but I should be beyond measure happy and proud if I could flatter myself that she loved me."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the rector, passionately. "Has it already come to this? I ought to have known that she would treat you as she treated me—never rest until she got you within her toils, and then laugh you to scorn."

The rector spoke with such terrible, tragic earnestness, that although he did not shake Christian's faith in his cousin, he felt a deep compassion for the unfortunate man, whose happiness had evidently been blighted, and his judgment perverted by this wild passion.

"I think you are mistaken in Miss Alsager," he said, gently. "You may have misunderstood her, and so have been led away, but I am sure she is incapable of the conduct you attribute to her."

"Wait and see," answered the other, with feverish excitement. "Of course you believe in her now. I would have staked my life on her goodness at one time myself; but when, after having led me on and on until, although no coxcomb, I hope, I felt sure that I had only to ask to have, she gave me a cool and curt dismissal. I knew then that I had loved unworthily, and must root that cruel loveliness out of my heart, if I could."

"Are you sure she did not act under coercion?"

"I am sure no woman who respected herself would be coerced into anything dishonorable and heartless."

"I am afraid you cannot judge Miss Alsager," Christian said. "And I am now so placed that I cannot vindicate her without being guilty of a breach of confidence. Miss Alsager spoke of you to me one day—"

"Well?" exclaimed the rector, with almost breathless eagerness, his face flushing, his eye firing. "What did she say?"

"She led me to infer that she valued your society and friendship—"

"Then why forbid me the house?" he interrupted.

"Because she could not help herself, I should say."

"She gave you no explanation of her extraordinary conduct, then?"

"None whatever. I was not aware that you had been intimate at the house, and therefore there was no need for her to tell me anything."

"And you cannot even guess her motive?" he inquired, in the same eager tone.

"On the contrary, it seems to me quite plain."

The rector held his very breath to listen.

"Miss Alsager is not a free agent, and my uncle may have had some reasons for preferring that your visits should cease."

"Then he should have told me so, and given me his reasons."

"I quite agree with you that that would have been the best course to pursue; but it is not fair to make Miss Alsager responsible for her father's omissions or mistakes."

"But is she not responsible for having encouraged me, sir?" said the rector, fiercely.

"Yes, if she intended to do so; but I am sure you would make allowances for her if you knew all the difficulties of her position. There she is among those men, and without a mother's care or protection; quite helpless, poor girl! and yet anxious to do right. I have no doubt that she welcomed your visits as a pleasant distraction, without calculating consequences; but it is probable that something in your manner alarmed Mr. Alsager."

"Mr. Alsager always received me most cordially."

Christian lowered his head, and pondered. It seemed to him quite possible, knowing something of the anxious, watchful life they led at the Manor House, that the rector had been welcomed at first as likely to give a respectable tone. But, no doubt, when he became too importunate, and appeared at all hours, the inconvenience overbalanced the advantage, and poor Mabel had orders to banish him forthwith. Being so much in love, it would be easy to recall him at any moment if they should need his presence—poor Mabel, as usual, being the cat's-paw, and bearing all the blame, supposing Mr. Carboy resented their treatment.

But instead of resenting it openly, the unfortunate man appeared to have brooded over it in secret until he was worn to a mere shadow bodily, and his mind had nearly lost its balance.

And having instituted himself her champion and protector (because she had no other), Christian was anxious, if possible, to save her from this stigma as well as to restore Mr. Carboy to his senses; so he said, in a grave, impressive voice, "Will you take my advice, Mr. Carboy? I know a good deal more than I can tell you about the circumstances that would influence my cousin, and I am quite sure she would not be allowed to resume her acquaintance with you, however much she might wish it."

"Does she wish it?" he interrupted, eagerly.

"She values you as a friend," replied Christian, significantly.

"And nothing more?"

"Nothing more, I honestly believe, for it is better I should be quite frank with you. In any case, if she did care for you, she would not marry you."

"Why not?"

"I am afraid I cannot give you the reason, but I have no doubt of the fact in my own mind; and therefore my advice to you is to leave Lynton as soon as you can provide for your duty, and not to return for some months."

"I see; you think that a change would cure me," said the rector, gloomily.

"Whether it would cure you or not, you are only torturing yourself unnecessarily by remaining at Lynton."

"That may be; but haven't you known

cases where men hugged the ill that was eating into their flesh?"

"No, I can't say I have. I love my cousin, too—Mr. Carboy, I will tell you this in confidence—but the moment I am sure that my affection is not reciprocated, I shall leave Lynton, and use my utmost strength to conquer my passion."

"Ah! you think so now; but if it came to the point, you would stay on, as I have done. It is not so easy as you fancy to conquer a passion like this."

"I never said it was easy; but I aver that it is possible."

The rector shook his head.

"I have been trying for the past two months, and ought, therefore, to be able to speak with authority."

"But you have never been away."

"Why should I go away? Wherever I might go, I should find her image as vivid as it is here."

"Indeed you would not. Nature is nature, and a change of scene and society distracts every one's thoughts—not to any great degree at first, perhaps; but gradually we are influenced without knowing it."

"Yes, if a light fancy; but it could not be thus with a passion which has fastened round your very heart-strings."

"Indeed, Mr. Carboy, you, must not continue to trifle with yourself. If you stay at Lynton any longer brooding over your trouble, your reason will give way."

The rector looked straight at him with those strange tragic eyes of his.

"Do you see any sign of this?" he asked.

"I see that you have gone as far as it is safe to go."

To his surprise, the rector laughed loudly and gleefully.

"That is what I have been praying for," he said. "Not to remember or feel would be Paradise after what I have endured these last weeks. And then," he added, with a cunning smile, "if I were mad, I should not be responsible in the sight of Heaven, or in men's eyes either, for anything I might do."

"But surely there can be no more terrible affliction than to feel as if you are losing all control over yourself?"

"You are quite wrong," he answered, with gleaming eyes. "It is delightful—just the sensation one would have in riding an unbroken horse, and putting him at a precipice. Fancy the wild, exhilarating leap into space!—the bewildering, delicious sweep downward, downward, until breath and sense were gone, and you felt nothing until you awoke in another world! Do you know, I have pictured that until all my pulses were in a riot, and I could hardly hold myself in. But I thought it was just possible that she might love me, after all; and so long as I had this hope, life was endurable, if not sweet. But now—" He broke off abruptly, and stared out of the window for a moment; then added, in a quieter tone, "I have done my best to save you from a like fate, Mr. Alsager, and you would not heed me, therefore must go your own way now. But if a greater sorrow comes upon you later you will not be able to say, as I can, that you had neither preparation nor warning. Good-day to you, sir!"

And rising suddenly from his seat, he flung open the glass door by which Christian had entered, and stood beside it, waiting for the other to depart.

It was very difficult to linger after such a distinct dismissal; but Christian did venture just to say, "And you will go away from Lynton for awhile, Mr. Carboy, will you not? Believe me, it is your only chance of cure."

"My future concerns myself alone," was the stern reply. "Leave me to my own conscience, sir."

"But you did not leave me to my own conscience," returned Christian, gently.

"It was my duty, as a Christian minister, to warn you off the quicksands on which I myself had been wrecked. But, believe me, Mr.

Alsager, I interfered with great reluctance and hesitation."

"I don't know why you should. I was not at all likely to misunderstand you."

"I could not tell that. Besides, it was natural, after all, that I should try and prevent you from winning the woman who had rejected me, but whom I coveted still with all my strength."

"Yes; if you could thereby insure her remaining single all her life. But my cousin is very young and beautiful, and is sure to marry sooner or later."

"Nothing may matter to me when that time comes," he answered, gloomily. "'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' I am afraid I must ask you to leave me now, Mr. Alsager, for I have work to do that will not wait, and it is later than I thought. I only hope you may never have occasion to regret having paid no heed to my warning."

So saying, the rector stepped back, and, bowing once more, quitted the room by the opposite door, leaving Christian so agitated that he had no heart for shooting; and, shouldering his gun, started slowly toward home.

He reached the Manor House about five; and as he passed under the library window, Mabel put her head out, and said, gayly, "Don't go in, Christian; I am just coming to join you, and you can't think how I am panting for a breath of fresh air."

"I thought you were so busy," returned Christian, rather coldly.

Mabel colored warmly as she replied, "It wasn't that; but they wanted me to stay indoors, because—because—"

"Well?"

"Because" (hanging her head in pretty confusion) "they thought if I did you would, and they didn't care to have you dogging their steps."

"I am not aware that I have ever taken that trouble," responded Christian, haughtily.

"I told them so; but they would have their own way."

"But, in any case, there was no need to shut you up."

"They didn't shut me up; but they made me promise to keep the door fastened until five o'clock."

"You are a very obedient sister, I must say."

"It was papa who ordered me," she said, in a low distressed tone. "And please don't ask me any more questions."

She disappeared from the window; and in another minute joined him in the garden, looking pale, and rather troubled, but ready to smile and forget if he would help her at all.

But the rector's confidence rankled, although Christian had defended his cousin to the other; and he could not help saying, as he watched Mabel's face: "I have had a long talk with Mr. Carboy this afternoon."

"I am so glad!" she answered, without the faintest sign of consciousness or confusion.

"He must be so dull, poor man; papa won't let me ask him here now."

"Why not?"

"He came too often," she replied, "and my brothers were angry. I suppose we were the only people he knew, and he was glad of the change. I would rather have amused him all day, and every day, than have had to hurt his feelings, poor man! But, of course, it did not matter what I thought or felt; I had to write the letter."

"Then you never guessed that he was in love with you, Mabel?"

"Don't be so absurd, Christian! I am sure he never dreamt of such a thing!"

It was impossible to doubt her sincerity, and Christian felt ashamed of his doubts as he said, "Unfortunately it is only too true, Mabel, and the man has been brooding over his passion until he is well-nigh crazy, and is scarcely to be trusted alone. Could you persuade him to go away, do you think? Write and ask him. If not, there will be some tragedy there, I am convinced; and you can't

do any harm by interfering, if you do no good. The poor man ought not to be alone just now; and if he paid no attention to your letter, then I would take upon myself to communicate with his friends. If anything should happen, it will be laid to your door."

"Laid to my door?" she repeated, incredulously. "How could that be?"

"He affirms that you gave him every encouragement at first, and then suddenly cast him off."

"I was always pleased to see him here, because I thought he was so lonely at home. And then he was an intelligent companion; and having so few visitors, I naturally enjoyed his society; but as to encouraging him, I solemnly declare I never even dreamt of such a thing! I am afraid I might have flirted with him a little if I had known that he cared for me, for the sake of amusement; it has been so dull here sometimes. But I did not know he cared for me—on my honor, Christian!" she concluded, with great earnestness; "and therefore I cannot even accuse myself of coquetry!"

"I was sure he had misjudged you," said Christian, quite forgetting now that he had ever doubted her himself. "It is very unfortunate, Mabel, but you cannot help anything. Still, I would write to him if I were you, and try and persuade him to leave Lynton for awhile."

"So I will," she answered readily. "I am so very, very sorry he misunderstood me, and should be glad to do anything to remedy the evil."

It was with a wonderful feeling of relief, and thankfulness, and renewed faith that Christian walked on beside her after this, with the sweetness of love's young dream filling his heart, just as the golden radiance of the sunset filled the western sky.

Neither Mr. Alsager nor his sons appeared that evening, and he and Mabel were very happy together. She sung him his favorite songs, and laughed and talked gayly enough to outward seeming, but the shadow was always in her eyes, even when her lips smiled, and he dared not ask her why this was.

That night Christian was roused in his first sleep again by hearing scounds in the passage outside, as if some one were struggling with a heavy weight. But when he got up to see what was the matter, he found that he was locked in, and so contented himself with shaking the door to show that he was on the alert—a piece of imprudence that he was sorry for the next minute, remembering that it could only have the effect of prejudicing his cousins still further against him, without being of any use.

He did not sleep much after this, and when the clock struck five, left his bed, and with his gun over his shoulder, marched off to the leach, and was standing, with his hat in his hand, drinking in the briny freshness of the morning air, when a shot whizzed past him, so near that he actually felt a slight wind on his cheek.

Instinctively he dropped onto his knees in time to avoid a second, which passed about a yard above his head, in such a straight line he could not doubt that his timely maneuver had saved his life for the moment.

Starting to his feet, before his enemy had time to take aim again, he flew to the shelter of the rocks, where no one could fire at him without appearing in sight, which he did not at all fancy would be the present tactics of his treacherous assailant.

Anyhow, his gun was loaded, and he was not only prepared for an attack, but ready to sell his life very dearly, if he must part with it.

However, two hours passed away without any new adventure; and, reassured now, Christian left his shelter, and was about to proceed homeward, when he saw Mr. Carboy come leaping down the cliff with perilous speed, run toward the sea, and dash into it, holding his hands above his head.

He shouted to him frantically as he hurried forward, forgetting now his own danger, and

the rector turned his wild, contorted face for a second, almost as if he had hoped that the appeal had come from Mabel.

But seeing Christian, and Christian only, he uttered a loud, meaningless laugh; then, with a scream that would haunt the other for many a day and night, leapt into the white crest of an advancing wave and disappeared.

Christian threw off his clothes, and swam in; but though he waited about the spot till well-nigh exhausted, saw no further sign of the unhappy man; nor were the villagers, whom he called to his assistance, more fortunate.

"It would have been cruel kindness, after all, to bring him back to life," thought Christian, as he walked home in a very subdued frame of mind.

He did not mention anything about the two shots that had been fired at him to Mabel. He knew she was troubled enough as it was about the unfortunate man who had died for her sake; and, indeed, he had almost forgotten about them himself in the excitement of his second adventure.

He did not see his cousins all day; but when they met at the dinner-table, Tom was actually pleasant, and treated Christian with such unusual favor, he felt quite ashamed of having suspected him in the morning, and readily persuaded himself that he had nearly fallen a victim to a short-sighted attempt to shoot sea-gulls on the part of some cockney sportsman.

When Mabel had quitted the room, and they were sitting over their wine, Tom said, turning to Christian, with quite a cordial air, "There's a big ship trying to get into the bay, and if the wind changes it will drive against the rocks, so I thought I'd run out and give them a word of warning, if you wouldn't mind coming with me. Walter is busy to-night."

"I never said so," put in Walter, sulkily.

"Well, you can come, too, if you like. There's room for three in the boat. But nobody wants you if you would rather stay at home."

"Are you ready, Christian?" inquired Tom, ten minutes later. "The tide will just serve us if we make haste; but it will be on the turn an hour hence."

"All right. I'll just get my coat."

"You won't want anything of that sort," replied Tom, following him into the hall. "It's hot enough to-night."

"I couldn't row in a dress-coat," objected Christian; "and I sha'n't be a moment."

It seemed as if Mabel had been listening for his step, for she flung open the door, and said, eagerly, suspiciously, "What is the matter? Where are you going?"

"Christian is going with me, if you can spare him," replied Tom, stepping out of the shadow, and confronting her. "I think he must be pretty well tired by this time of being tied to your apron-strings."

A crimson flush passed over Mabel's beautiful face, as she said, "You left him entirely to me, and I have done my best to amuse him, conscious all the while that my effort must be a failure."

"Oh, Mabel! when this fortnight has been the very happiest of my life, and you know it!" Christian cried out, reproachfully, the look of proud pain in her eyes making him bold. "I could wish no better company than yours all the year round, and I sha'n't be gone more than an hour."

"You needn't go at all, if it's such an effort to tear yourself away," said Tom, grumpily. "I thought you'd like the change."

Mabel made him a sign, which he took to mean that he had better go; and it was not until he had reached the outer door, and Tom had tight hold of his arm, that he saw by the despairing gesture that he had misunderstood her.

But he could not draw back then; and Tom had no mind he should, evidently, for he pulled him along at such a pace that, although a quick walker naturally, he had at last to call out for mercy.

"I'm afraid about the tide," muttered Tom. "And don't you hear how the wind is rising? It will blow a gale before morning, and if the ship isn't within shelter by that time, I wouldn't give a snap of my finger for the life of a single man on board her."

"This is a very bad coast, isn't it?" inquired Christian, as well as his breath would allow.

"Deuced bad," panted Tom. "There's more wrecks here on an average than in any other part of England. Hulloa, Walter! Is that you?"

"All right!" sung out Walter, who had evidently preceded them. "Give us a hand as quickly as you can. There's no time to lose."

Swiftly, but silently, the three young men pushed the boat down the shelving beach, and then Walter, who had a pair of high boots, gave the last final push, standing half-way up to his knees in water, sprung in after them, and they went off with a "swish" on the breast of a big wave.

It was dusk now, and in the gloom the handsome, dark faces of the two brothers had an almost fierce intentness, or so it seemed to Christian, who not being allowed to row, after all, had nothing better to do than to watch those two, and found the occupation gradually more and more fascinating.

What young giants they were, and how easily the boat skimmed the waves, impelled by their strong arms!

It was evident they were accustomed to row together by the evenness of their stroke, and he could not help admiring the calm power, and entire absence of boasting or self-assertion, that leavened the many faults of his two cousins.

The surface of the sea was calm enough, though there was a treacherous under-swell which made the boat roll a little; but to his companions' surprise, Christian kept his color, and laughed and talked cheerfully, although the others were so taciturn. They did not know that he had been practicing with Mabel ever since he came to Lynton, and was beginning to feel quite at home on the sea.

When they were about a mile from land, in deep water, the two brothers ceased to row, and turned their lowering faces and intense eyes on Christian, with a sort of menace he had been slow to realize earlier, but began now to understand. Walter was the spokesman, and bending forward, said, in a hoarse, menacing voice, "You came down here to play the spy, it seems. How much have they promised you for betraying us?"

"I don't understand you," answered Christian, coldly. "What is there to betray?"

They laughed long and loud.

"A pretty piece of acting, upon my honor!" cried Walter, "when you are spying and creeping round the rocks every morning early; you won't deny that, I suppose?"

"I deny that I am 'spying and creeping,'" returned Christian, proudly. "But I certainly go to the rocks every morning."

"What for?"

"That is my business, not yours," Christian said, for he had no mind to tell them his secrets, and, moreover, his pride was stung at the tone of authority Walter assumed. "I did not know it was necessary to ask your permission before I took a morning walk."

"I never said it was; at the same time, we don't choose to be watched about, nor to have any one playing the spy down here. You understand?"

"I don't understand, but I think I guess," replied Christian, with a frigid smile. "If it had not been for uncle Cyril and Mabel, I should have had a poor time of it at Lynton."

"Then why did you come?"

"Because I was invited."

"But you might have kept quiet."

"I wasn't aware I had been particularly aggressive," answered Christian, his temper rising.

"I daresay," sneered Walter, "you think we are fools, don't you? We have seen what was going on from the beginning; and the long

and the short of it is, we are not going to stand any more humbug. Do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear," responded Christian. "What next?"

There was no answer to this question.

It seemed to him that Tom and Walter rose together, whether to attack him or not he could not tell; but the boat gave a sudden lurch, and before he had time to make even a remark, turned over, and he felt himself going down, down, into the dark depths of the sea.

He rose to the surface presently, and struggled out of half his great-coat; then feeling a little faint and exhausted, turned over on his back, and floated for a while. In the dusk he could see the huge black outline of the big ship; and in the opposite direction, making for the shore with all speed, he could have sworn were his two cousins in their boat.

If so, they had simply brought him out to murder him, and to cry out for help was to give them an extra triumph. He would rather perish than that they should say he was afraid, and yet life had become very sweet to him of late by reason of his hopes.

He saw the lights at the old Manor House as he floated away into the gathering darkness, and wondered if Mabel would grieve for him very much. The pain of death would be parting from her; and yet, maybe, she would never give him a thought when he had once passed out of her sight.

But he did not mean to perish without a struggle. The instinct of self-preservation urged him to make every effort to save himself, and then he longed beyond words to disappoint his cousins, and suddenly confront them when they were the least prepared for the resurrection of their supposed victim.

In the midst of his great peril, the thought of such a victory as this warmed and strengthened him, and he struck out boldly toward the big ship which lay carved in shadow against the dark, starless sky. But before he could reach it, or send up a cry for help, he grew suddenly faint, and, with a strangled prayer, went down into the hollow of a huge wave!

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

THE hall-clock was striking nine as Mabel, who had been sitting with her door open, listening intently to every sound, heard steps crossing the hall, and darted out just as Tom and Walter were disappearing into the library.

She heard her father say "Well?" in an inquiring tone, and then, feeling bold enough to beard a lion in its den, she suddenly presented herself before the three men.

Walking straight up to Tom with flashing eyes, she said, in a loud, clear voice, "What have you done with Christian Alsager?"

Tom glanced uneasily at his father, and hung his head.

"My dear Mabel," said Mr. Alsager, with a suavity of manner that was very pleasant to hear it not quite safe to trust, "remember this is contrary to our rules and your own promise. I can't possibly allow any interference of this sort."

"But, papa," she said, with a choking sob, "he is our own cousin, and you know"—passionately—"that if you had trusted him, he would never have betrayed a man of whose hospitality he had partaken—"

"And to whose daughter he had made desperate love," put in Walter, with a grim laugh.

"He has never made love to me!" exclaimed Mabel, indignantly. "But that is not your fault, for you threw us together continually with that view, forgetting that I might not care to play into your hands. You know" (turning toward her father and speaking with tearful earnestness) "that I have borne a good deal. Your wretched secrets killed my mother, and would kill me, only that I am made of stouter stuff than she was. I promised not to interfere if you did not ask me to do any thing my conscience disapproved; but when it becomes a question of my poor cousin's life or

liberty, I am bound to remember that you invited him here for your own purposes, and he has no one but me to take his part. Therefore, I aver most solemnly that if Christian does not return here safe and sound some time tomorrow, you shall rue it bitterly! I am an Alsager, too; and though you may despise me, Tom and Walter, because I am only a girl, you shall see that my will is as strong as yours when I choose to exert it, and that you had better make peace with me unless you want your pretty plans to end disastrously!"

"My dear Mabel!" said Mr. Alsager, admonishingly.

But she would not heed.

"It is time to speak plainly now! I have been neither blind nor deaf these last few days, and have seen and heard a good deal. At first you tried to scare Christian out of the house, and when he laughed at your mummery, resolved to get rid of him at all hazards. You thought he knew nothing about riding, and therefore to put him on Sultan would be an excellent idea; but he conquered the brute completely, and came out of the ordeal unscathed, so that you had to think of something else. It was a good idea to take him for a row in the dusk of the evening, and, of course, you upset the boat. I have seen you practice that little feat often enough. But there is one thing you did not know, and that is that Christian swims as well as either of you."

"Come—that is a very good thing," said Mr. Alsager, with affected heartiness. "Then your little adventure, boys, may not end so disastrously as I feared. I wouldn't have any harm come to my brother's son for the world, and I am sure you did your best to save the poor lad."

"Of course!" grumbled Walter. "We waited about the place for more than half an hour, and then, as a storm was brewing, and we were wet through into the bargain, decided to row back to the shore. As he didn't come up in that time, he wasn't likely to trouble any one again; and it was no use our hanging about, at the risk of our lives, when we could do no good."

Mabel smiled disdainfully. She could have cried her heart out, only she was too proud to let them see her real feeling toward Christian. Indeed, the revelation had come upon her suddenly during the hour of anguish and suspense just gone by; but instead of the shy joy that fills a maiden's heart when this wonderful knowledge dawns upon her for the first time, true to her sorrowful destiny, poor Mabel's love was all suffering and pain, and promised to be nothing now but a great longing and a passionate regret. For how could she doubt that Christian had perished? It seemed to her that Tom and Walter would be glad if they could give her a little hope just to quiet her, and since they had not done so, it was clear that they believed Christian to be dead and gone.

It was no use appealing to her father. His suave manner had deceived her once, but she knew now that it was only a blind, and to lean on him would be to lean on a rotten reed indeed. Better even to trust Tom or Walter, for, at least, they were plain and outspoken. Their cruelty came of their rough training, but they were no hypocrites, to do them justice, and all their father's warnings could not always make them as cautious as he desired. Therefore, though she had addressed herself to her brothers, she believed that her father was the originator of the plot, and that something had occurred since Christian's arrival at Lyn-ton to render his presence so peculiarly undesirable that he had to be got rid of at all risks.

Of course, Mr. Alsager had not anticipated this when he wrote the invitation, which he must look upon now as a fatal blunder, that had entailed endless annoyance on them, and necessitated a crime. Mabel was reasoning as they would reason, for, of course, to her mind nothing could excuse or justify the act they had committed, but Tom and Walter were

perfectly lawless by this time, and he would be apt to argue that what they had done had been done in self-defense. And, moreover, they had not placed Christian in any worse position than themselves, since they had given him the same chance of life that they had had.

Of course, if he couldn't swim, this chance was not worth much, but that was his lookout. They weren't expected to know all his deficiencies, and of course he was not obliged to go out with them if he had any fear of the result.

The young men had not much conscience left by this time; still, they did make some sort of excuse to themselves for their treachery to Christian, and felt a little shamefaced at Mabel's fiery reproaches.

"I don't expect you stayed long enough to risk anything," said the girl, with prophetic accuracy. "You took him out to sea on purpose to get rid of him, and, maybe, you have succeeded; but if any harm has come to our cousin Christian, you shall rue it with all your strength!"

"Hush, my love—hush!" said Mr. Alsager, soothingly. "It is not pretty for young ladies to threaten."

"Pretty!" she echoed, passionately. "As if one could speak in a pretty, ladylike way of what has happened to-night!"

"But why refer to it at all, my love, if it agitates you?" he said, with his benevolent air. "You know I want you to be happy, and there is no need for you to know anything that goes on. Indeed, you promised you would hold aloof from our secrets, and for your own sake I am sorry to see you break through this rule. If Christian is a good swimmer, he will, no doubt, return to us in safety; if not, it is one of those unfortunate accidents which happen occasionally, and the less said about it the better. By the by, boys, you must be wet through. Hadn't you better ring for Burford at once? It is quite as well, that in case of any difficulties, he should be able to testify that you had been in the water. I shall mention that the boat upset, and you had all three to swim to land. It was very easy for you to get separated, but, of course, Christian will turn up later; and as far as I am concerned, if he has not returned by bedtime, I shall sit up until I see him. I could not possibly lie down to rest when my own nephew was in peril; although," shaking his head solemnly, "I greatly fear, I do indeed, that the poor lad has found a watery grave near this terrible coast of ours."

"In that case you will come into all his money," said Mabel, with a coolness that surprised herself. "I remember your asking him if he had made a will, and he told you he had not; but that if anything should happen to him he desired nothing better than that his fortune should go to his heir-at-law—you."

"I think I do recollect something of the kind," replied Mr. Alsager, reflectively. "But we won't calculate upon such contingencies until we are quite obliged. I shall hope to see the lad in this very room before the night is out. On second thoughts, it might be well if Burford and I went down to the beach, and looked about us. The boys have had enough fatigue and excitement as it is."

"You had better be quick, then," Tom said; "for the storm is rising fast, and you'll be blown into the sea soon, if you venture on the beach."

"I'll start at once. Ring the bell, Walter!" exclaimed Mr. Alsager, rising. "Fill my flask with brandy, one of you, while I put on my great-coat."

This might be a ruse to pacify her, Mabel knew; still it was barely possible that Christian might have swum to land, and was lying exhausted among the rocks.

Anyhow, it would be blessed relief to be moving; and so, when Mr. Alsager came out presently, he found Mabel standing at the front door, in a thick, tight jacket, and a black velvet hood on her head.

"Indeed, my dear," he said, "I could not

allow you to come with us. The risk would be too great. Don't you hear the thunder now?"

"I am not afraid of a storm," replied Mabel, with great determination. "And if you don't let me go with you I shall go alone, papa, which will be a greater risk still."

He looked into his daughter's eyes, and seeing a spirit and courage that equaled his own, quailed, and began to capitulate.

"Well, dear, I don't want to thwart you unless I am obliged. Supposing you come to the corner, and wait there until we return? You can shelter behind the Table Rock if the storm increases."

"I would rather go on with you."

"But, Mabel, it is scarcely safe."

"I have often been on the beach in worse weather than this, papa, and never came to any harm. You forget that I am not a town-bred girl. Nothing either frightens or tires me; and I should die if I stopped still anywhere just now."

If Mabel had not known she could trust herself, she would not have gone down to the beach that night. But she felt that she had the strength to endure anything just then, a kind of somber excitement sustaining her.

She might give way altogether, later; but that would not be until she was back in her own room, with the door fastened against all intruders.

Meanwhile, she walked silently along at her father's side, undismayed by the angry mutterings of the thunder, or the quick, vivid flashes of lightning, that suddenly lit up the sea, and played among the jagged edges of the rocks.

The wind gave an eerie wail every now and then; and when the great gusts came, Mabel had hard work to keep her feet. But she set her teeth, and marched on resolutely down the rugged pathway that led to the beach, following close in her father's steps.

CHAPTER V.

SUCH A PLEASANT OLD MAN.

As they turned round the rock, and stepped onto the shingle, a sudden blast caught them, and lifted Mabel off her feet.

Then, for the first time, she clung to her father's arm, and they all three stood still waiting for another flash of lightning to show them whether it was safe to proceed.

They could scarcely hear each other speak above the hoarse roar of the waves, so quickly had the sea risen; and when the flash came, it showed them a long white line of surf close at their feet; and beyond this an angry, dark sea, specked with foam.

Mr. Alsager stepped back then, drawing Mabel with him a little way up the cliff.

"It's no use," he said; "and we had better get back home as fast as we can. This is only the beginning of the storm, and now it is not safe even where we stand. Walk first with the lantern, Burford, and we will keep Miss Alsager between us. Unless Mr. Christian got to land an hour ago, it's certain he could not have landed at all. But I can't help thinking he will turn up to-morrow somewhere; and, anyhow, it's no use our risking our lives, as we could do no good if we stayed here all night."

"None whatever, sir," replied Burford, respectfully. "But I do trust it's all right, as the young gentlemen got home safe."

"Thank you, Burford, thank you!" said Mr. Alsager, blandly. "It comforts one to hear a suggestion of this sort, from a knowledgeable person like you. I have no doubt myself that your prophecy will come true. Hark! don't I hear a gun out at sea?"

"Yes, sir," replied Burford; "it has fired twice before. There's been a ship waiting just outside the bay all the evening, and I should be afraid it is in trouble."

"Ah, yes; poor thing!" said Mr. Alsager; and Mabel could almost have sworn she heard him chuckling softly to himself. "They couldn't have known the coast, could they? I hope they will get away safely; but I greatly fear—"

A great crash of thunder silenced him for a minute, and then he hurried forward, adding in a nervous tone, "Come along, Mabel; it is not safe to be out in such a night. I shall be thankful myself to be under shelter again."

As soon as Mr. Alsager crossed the threshold of his own house, he rung for the servants, and inquired anxiously if Mr. Christian had returned.

"No, sir," answered Marsham, who had come to see after her young lady, and scold her a little for her imprudent walk. "I'm afraid there isn't much hope of our ever seeing him again now."

"I don't know about that, Marsham; you take a very depressed view of matters," said Mr. Alsager. "I am afraid it is your disposition to look on the dark side of things."

Marsham glanced toward her master as he spoke, and from the expression of her eyes it was easy to see that she was not one of those who were deceived by his charming manner. Perhaps Mrs. Alsager had not been able to hide quite all the truth from her faithful attendant through the long, dark hours of sickness. Anyhow, though loyally silent, Marsham knew the miserable secrets of this house, and felt sometimes as if she must carry her foster-child right away, and support her by her own honest labor. Two or three times she had made this proposition to Mabel; but the girl had shaken her head sorrowfully.

"No, dear nurse," the girl would say; "I must stay by my father as long as possible. Things may mend."

But to-night, as she sunk into the nearest chair in her bedroom, and let her arms fall listlessly by her side, she said, in a hopeless tone, "I am going away, Marsham; I have borne as much as I can bear. You had better go and lie down for a few hours, and then pack my things. I must only take necessities, remember, and useful clothes, for we shall have some difficulty in getting them out of the house, in any case."

"I'll manage that, missie," replied Marsham, whose face glowed with feeling. "I am so thankful you are going, I don't know whether I stand on my head or my heels. I don't trust Burford myself, and I am sure he knows more than Mr. Alsager has any idea of. Those plausible people are always deceitful, and you may depend on one thing: if any one made it worth his while to betray his master, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment, for he loves money better than he loves his soul."

"I never thought that of Burford."

"No, missie, I daresay not; nor I neither at first. But he wants to take a hotel, it seems, and fancying I had some pretty savings, he asked me to be the landlady; but he's not the sort I should care for, even if my marrying days wasn't over, for twice now I have caught him listening at the library door when master and the young gentlemen were there together."

Mabel started violently.

"Why didn't you tell me this before, Marsham?"

"Because it would only have worried you, missie, and done no good. I've kept my eye upon him since, and I'll wager he hasn't got much information out of the keyhole since I found him out. However, I'm afraid there's something more than common up just now, and therefore, the sooner you are out of the house the better."

"I shouldn't like papa to think I had forsaken him for that reason," observed Mabel, wistfully.

"He will know the reason, if you tell him. It's clear Mr. Christian has been spirited away somehow; and," lowering her voice, "Burford threw out some queer hints, in the kitchen when master told him to get a lantern and follow him down to the beach. 'It's like searching for a needle in a stack of hay,' he said. 'Those who find Mr. Christian will have to wait for the turn of the tide.'"

"What did he mean?" inquired Mabel, with a convulsive shudder.

"He meant he had been drowned, and his body would come ashore when the tide turned. And then he went on to say that Mr. Tom and Mr. Walter had taken good care of themselves."

"They are such good swimmers," said Mabel, faintly.

"Burford says Mr. Christian was, too. Anyhow, it's no use harassing you about all this more than can be helped. I have my feeling that Mr. Christian isn't dead, after all; only put out of the way for a time."

"That is what I try to hope, and yet—"

"Your heart is heavy, missie, I know. We must trust that all will come right for you in the end, for you have done no harm."

"But the innocent suffer for the guilty sometimes."

"For a while; but I have noticed that things straighten themselves, missie, if one trusts; and now that you are going away, you will be spared a good deal of pain. What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve for."

"I don't know about that. Although I shall see nothing, I fancy I shall grieve over what I can imagine. How terrible!" she added, suddenly, as the lightning illuminated every corner of the room, and was reflected in the mirror over the mantelpiece like a cloud of flame. "I can never remember such a storm as this before. I am afraid there will be more wrecks. We will go and live away from the sea, nurse, won't we? I am tired of it; it is so cruel, and sly and treacherous. This morning it was like a lake, and the tiny wavelets seemed just to glide toward the beach in play; now, all the shingle is covered with the foam of the huge waves, and who can tell what may be lying there to-morrow, when the fury of the storm has spent itself?"

With another long shudder, she buried her face against the back of the chair, for even while speaking she fancied that she saw a fair, dead face—the face of the man she loved—lying with wide-open eyes among the rocks, but so silent and so cold, although she had a great secret to tell him if only he would wake and understand.

"Oh, nurse, I can't bear it!—I can't bear it!" she cried out, in the anguish of this vision. "Let me go away at once!"

"My dear missie, it is impossible now. I see what is the matter with you. All this trouble and the thunder together has upset your nerves. Then you have been fasting for hours, poor dear, and exhausted. I know what will do you good."

And she hurried away, to return presently, with some cold brandy and water, which she insisted Mabel should drink.

Being unaccustomed to stimulants, this dose took instant effect, and in less than ten minutes Mabel was sleeping soundly.

Marsham watched her for awhile; and then, satisfied that the girl would be all right for some hours to come, stole down-stairs into the kitchen, where Burford lay sleeping on an old-fashioned oak settle in front of the fire.

Softly as she moved, he roused directly, and sat bolt upright, staring at her with bleared eyes.

"What's up now?" he said. "Is it the police?"

"Is it the Pope of Rome?" she answered, disdainfully. "That's quite as likely. If I was you, Mr. Burford, I'd take rather less beer for my supper to-morrow night, for you're never too clear, you know, and can't afford to booze away any of your wits. Police, indeed! Who ever heard of such a thing in a gentleman's house?"

"Don't know so much about that," responded Burford, sententiously. "I've heard of more unlikely things."

"Have you, indeed?" she cried, pretending to laugh. "Really, Mr. Burford, I never saw you so brilliant before!"

"Just now you told me I had boozed all my wits away," retorted Burford, sullenly. "What is it you mean?"

"I'll tell you at breakfast. I'm going to bed

now; I can't do without beauty-sleep, if you can. Hark! what's that?"

Burford smiled cunningly.

"Do you mean to say you have been all these years at the Manor House, and need to ask now what that is?"

"Well, you see, I have minded my own business instead of other people's," she said, significantly.

"And you've been a sound sleeper," was the significant reply. "Come, Miss Marsham, what's the use of trying to humbug me! What I know you know, I daresay."

"At any rate, what I know I keep to myself."

"So have I, haven't I? And if so be a certain lady would change her mind about a little matter I put to her the other day, I might be induced to go on keeping things to myself."

A sharp retort trembled on Marsham's tongue; but remembering that it would be as well to keep him in a good humor until she had got her young mistress out of the house, she suddenly assumed a coquettish air, and said, with a simper, "La, Mr. Burford, how you do startle one! You've made my heart beat so I don't know where I am. And what a time of night to ask people to change their minds when they are so tired out they have no mind at all—and in such a storm, too! If I was you I should go to bed, and never trouble about the little matter you mention until—"

"Until?" urged Burford.

"Until I tell you you may."

And Marsham hung her head, and looked charmingly bashful, not to say encouraging.

"Very well," said Burford, eagerly; "I'll take you at your word. And as to interfering in the affairs of some people, whose names are unmentionable, I'll be whipped first, as long as you behave as pleasant as you have behaved to-night."

"That's a bargain, then," she said, holding out her hand.

"Yes, my dear, it is," he replied, squeezing her hand very laid; "and just to show you how I keep a promise, I'll go straight off to bed this very moment, with my fingers in my ears, although you'll admit there are uncommonly queer noises in the house to-night."

"What can you expect in such a storm?"

"Why, of course, it's the storm. Thank you for reminding me of that little fact," he answered, with great affability. "You always was such a clever woman, Marsham. I remember saying to myself the first time I saw you, 'There's a head and an understanding, if any man wanted a real, useful sort of wife to help him along in his business, and keep things together.' You know what two and two make, don't you, my dear?"

"Yes; and I know what sitting up all night makes—fools!" she had just said, when the kitchen door opened, and Walter looked in.

"What are you doing up at this hour?" he inquired, sharply and suspiciously.

"I fell asleep in the settle, sir," answered Burford, in his usual obsequious tone. "I don't believe I should have woken up all night if Miss Marsham hadn't come down to fetch something."

"Well, get you to bed now, at any rate!" said the young man, sternly. "Your master would be very much displeased if he had any idea that you were up at this hour."

"I thought he wanted some one to keep awake in case Mr. Christian should return, sir."

A sudden pallor overspread the lad's handsome young face as he said, sharply, "Can't you see I am sitting up, you idiot?"

"Yes, sir; but I didn't know it was for Mr. Christian," replied Burford, so quietly, it was impossible to tell if he had any particular meaning in his words.

Walter glanced at him keenly; but seeing no expression of any sort on the man's face, seemed to be somewhat reassured, and added, "At any rate, you know now; and another time you don't sit up without orders."

"Very well, sir," replied Burford, submis-

sively; and Walter marched off again without having spoken to or looked at Marsham, who followed him quickly out, having no fancy for any further demonstration on the part of Burford, and anxious to get a word with her young master.

For this she had come down, only it had been necessary to ascertain whether, as she suspected, Burford was prying about, for she did not care to take him into her confidence.

Hearing her step, Walter wheeled round, and said, sharply, "Well, what do you want? I think you've all gone crazy to-night."

"I can't tell you here, in case any one should be listening," replied Marsham, quietly; "and yet you ought to know."

He pushed open the library door with an irritable gesture.

"Come in here, then, and be quick about it. I'm sick of all this foolery."

Marsham shut the door behind her, and then said, in a low, distinct voice, "The police are watching the house, Mr. Walter. I saw the inspector last evening, about nine o'clock, hiding in one of the arbors—"

"Well, let him," interrupted Walter, with a grim laugh. "He is such a duffer, one could easily manage him."

"Maybe; but Captain Lowe was there, too."

Walter started, and his face showed some concern and anxiety.

"Are you quite sure, Marsham? It was dark, you say?"

"As sure as I am that it is you standing opposite to me at this moment. I was strolling in the garden when I heard voices, and as I had had a suspicion for the last two days that the house was being watched, I hid myself behind the arbor where Captain Lowe and the inspector were, and listened with all my ears."

"Well?" urged Walter, pale with eagerness.

"I couldn't catch everything they said, for they spoke in whispers mostly; but, from what I gathered, I should say they mean to search the house if they can find any excuse."

"Ah! 'if,'" returned Walter, laughing under his breath, as if the excitement of this peril stimulated his lawless nature pleasantly. "What else?"

"There is nothing else; but I thought you ought to know this."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? You say this happened at nine o'clock last evening?"

"As nearly as possible, and I have been trying to get a chance of speaking to you ever since; but"—lowering her voice till it was a mere thread of sound—"Burford has his suspicions, and is on the watch."

"Would he betray us?"

"He would sell his soul for money," returned Marsham. "If any reward should be offered, he would claim it for a certainty; but I'll undertake to keep him quiet until to-morrow night, if you can manage to make things straight in the meantime. I propose this for my dear young lady's sake," added Marsham, with a sudden flash of anger and repugnance; "for, if you have really done any harm to poor Mr. Christian, I hope you may be punished with all my heart."

Her long service gave her unusual license; and, moreover, Walter could not afford to quarrel with her just then.

And to do him justice, he really believed that Christian's early visit to the beach had been from the motive he had ascribed, and that his cousin's silence, when accused, was an admission of guilt.

He turned to Marsham, after a short silence, and said, "Does Miss Mabel know this?"

"Not likely!" was the sharp reply. "She has trouble enough without adding to it. I don't know what would become of her, poor dear, if I took no more thought for her than the rest of you do!"

"And my father?"

"I don't know any thing about him," responded Marsham, shortly.

Walter seemed to reflect a moment, and then said, "You needn't make yourself uncomfortable, Marsham. I dare say it will all

blow over. We'll invite Captain Lowe in to breakfast; and, if Mabel will only be civil to him, he's sure not to make any difficulties. He's only joining in the affair now out of revenge because she snubbed him so unmercifully the last time he came here to dine."

"And I don't wonder, I am sure! Why, he's old enough to be her father!"

"So he may be; but that's no reason why she shouldn't be a little pleasant to him—just now, too, when it is so important to keep him in a good humor. You had better tell her the truth, Marsham, and then she'll understand that it won't do to give herself airs with old Lowe—at least, until the day after to-morrow."

"I'll tell her, and I don't suppose she'll mind, just for a little while," replied Marsham, secretly amused, and yet a little indignant, too, at the humiliations both Mabel and herself had to endure for the sake of those miserable secrets. "But perhaps Captain Lowe won't be here by the morning."

"In that case, I shall send over to his house, for I mean to get him here somehow; and you may tell Mabel, from me, that if she doesn't manage to keep him amused from nine o'clock until eleven, the consequences will be terrible."

"Very well," said Marsham; and stole back to her young mistress's room.

The day was beginning to dawn now—a strange, wild dawn, with mutterings of thunder still, and faint flashes of lightning clearing the gray of the sullen sky. The wind came in gusts, with an ominous spell of silence between.

The swollen sea lay in a heaving green mass beyond the rocks, showing long ridges of foam. Even here you could hear the booming of the waves breaking against the shore, and so dull and heavy was the atmosphere that the birds forgot to greet the new day with their songs, and cowered on the edge of their nests, shivering and mute.

Marsham dropped the curtain, sighing; and, having taken a peep at her foster child, who still slept heavily, sat down in an arm-chair, and fell into an uneasy doze.

CHAPTER VI.

SAUCY SALLY.

EVEN before she awoke to full consciousness, Mabel knew that something painful had happened, and that to come back to herself was to suffer. But, as soon as she opened her eyes, Marsham was on the alert, and began to tell her about Captain Lowe, in order to divert her attention from her cousin's unfortunate fate.

Only for the dim, vague hope she nourished still, Marsham's kindly efforts would have met with no success; but as it was, she brightened a little, and by the time she had drunk the cup of strong coffee Marsham had prepared for her, was ready to believe that she would find Christian in his usual place at the breakfast table presently.

In her pretty morning gown, with a pale blue bow at her throat, Mabel looked charming; and so Captain Lowe seemed to think as he went forward to meet her as she came across the hall.

"I hope I am not putting you to inconvenience," he said; "but your brother insisted upon my coming in to breakfast, although certain circumstances which I cannot explain made me feel as if it were hardly the right thing to do. However, perhaps I am altogether mistaken. I trust it is so, I am sure; for I could imagine nothing that would grieve me more than to have to inform against an old friend. You understand me, Miss Mabel, I feel certain."

"I hope I don't," she answered, with a coquettish smile. "Why should you inform against papa?"

"I told you that certain circumstances over which I had no control might force me to do so."

"No circumstances could force you to do

any thing so horrible. I shall never like you again for even thinking of such a thing!"

"Oh, Miss Mabel, don't be so cruel!" he said. "You know I would do any thing in the world to please you."

"That isn't the way, then," she retorted. "It isn't very agreeable to have the police prying about one's premises; and of course you needn't have allowed it unless you wished."

"I'd rather have died than had any thing to do with the matter if I could have helped myself," he answered, deprecatingly. "But duty is duty, Miss Mabel; and unfortunately, your father and brothers are not so prudent in some ways as one could wish."

"That is scandal, Captain Lowe. Who has ever proved any thing against any of them?"

"True," he said; "but this is a wicked world, Miss Mabel, and people are apt to think there is no smoke without fire."

"Because people are glad to think ill of their neighbors. Still, one expects one's friends to be a little more considerate."

"I am sure any one will tell you, Miss Mabel, that I have taken your part through thick and thin. Indeed, if I hadn't stood Mr. Alsager's friend, and pooh-poohed all the ugly rumors I heard, things would have been very different. But it's gone so far now I can't pretend to shut my eyes to the truth, unless I want to lose my appointment."

"What is gone so far? You are talking in riddles this morning," she said, as she led the way into the breakfast-room. "You forget that I am not in your secrets, Captain Lowe. But let us eat first and talk afterward. I am sure you must be hungry, and Walter looks nearly famished."

Captain Lowe did not notice that he was placed at table with his back to the sea; and the board was so well spread, and the young hostess so charming, that he could not be expected to think of any thing else.

"I advise you to take sherry first, and a cup of coffee as a digester after breakfast," said Walter, who was the only gentleman of the family present. "That is my plan; and for people who live an out-door life, I am sure it is the best. I think you will find that sherry good; but there's Burgundy on your left, if you prefer that. Make yourself at home, anyhow. They say that people with a clear conscience always make a good breakfast, and if that is true, we must be good people at Lynton."

And Walter laughed heartily, stealing a glance toward the wavering sea-line as he did so, and then looking at the clock.

There must have been a spice of mischief in Mabel, although the circumstances of her life had hitherto kept it in check, for she seconded Walter very ably, filling Captain Lowe's glass again and again when he was not looking, and intoxicating him still more with her smiles.

Her head ached sorely all the while, but she had learnt the art of self-repression as well as of self-control; and though she knew, of course, that her people were in the wrong, her sympathies were all on their side, nevertheless.

Captain Lowe could not recollect much about that breakfast afterward, except as to how it finished. He knew that Mabel was adorable, and the sherry superb; but his general impressions were rather confused, until the clock striking roused him to a sense of his duties, and he staggered to his feet, saying affably, "Why, that's ten o'clock, I declare! How the time does pass when one is in agreeable company! Miss Mabel, I must ask you to excuse me. I have an appointment with the inspector of police"—and winking one eye with vinous familiarity. "You may quite trust me. Under the circumstances, Mr. Alsager's honor is as dear to me as my own, and—and—by Jove! there must be some mistake. It can't possibly be eleven o'clock!"

"Looks like it," replied Walter, coolly and carelessly. "But, as you say, the time does pass quickly when one is in good company. I dare say the inspector won't mind having been kept waiting."

"When a lady's in the case,
All other things, of course, give place;"

but, if he cuts up rough, send him over here for some of my father's old ale. I don't know anything so improving to the temper and spirits as that."

Steadying himself by a chair, Captain Lowe looked vaguely out of the window, and a dim suspicion of the truth began to dawn upon him evidently, for he looked from the brother to the sister, and then out of the window again.

Finally, he sunk into a chair, and said, with more dignity than might have been expected, "I understand it all now, and you have ruined me between you; for I shall lose my appointment, of course, and deserve to, for allowing myself to be fooled by a lad and a girl. But mind me, here, Walter Alsager, if that's the Saucy Sally I see yonder, she shall never land another cargo in Lynton Bay!"

"She doesn't mean to try," replied Walter, cheerfully; "in fact, I don't mind telling you, in confidence, that we meant this to be the last in any case; for we have been so harassed and hunted this time, that we are getting tired of the whole business. I'm sorry to have played you a trick, Captain Lowe, upon my honor; but, you see, it had come to this—either you had to go to the wall or ourselves, and we naturally preferred that it should be you. As for Mabel, she has never known more than it was quite necessary for her to know; and, of course, when it was a question of her father's safety, she was bound to help me, however much she might disapprove."

"I don't see," answered Captain Lowe, suddenly sobered by the magnitude of the misfortune that had befallen him. "But I suppose it didn't occur to you that you couldn't safely stay at Lynton after what has happened."

"Pardon me," replied Walter, with great politeness; "we made all our calculations accordingly. The Manor House has been sold for nearly four months, just as it stands, and my father has been the purchaser's tenant since then."

It was Mabel's turn to look surprised. This was news also to her.

"Well, but," said Captain Lowe, "I don't understand."

"Don't you? I am sorry for that, for I have no more information to give, except that after you paid the Saucy Sally a visit yesterday evening, we got on board the few things there that belonged to us, and my father set sail this morning, as soon as the tide was high enough to let him get out of the bay; otherwise," added Walter, who had come out in a new character altogether, "he would have enjoyed your company as much as we have, and entertained you better."

He made an elaborate bow as he finished speaking, and so crestfallen and overcome did the poor captain of Coast-guards look, Mabel could not help feeling for him, and attempting some kind of consolation.

But he turned from her wrathfully, and, without a word, strode out.

Whereupon, "We had better make ourselves scarce," said Walter. "Just get your hat and shawl, Mabel; there isn't a minute to spare."

"I am not going," answered Mabel, quietly. "I would rather lead my own life at last. I have suffered cruelly all these years, and you have had no pity on me, and I want to get away from it all, and try to be respectable and respected."

"Exactly," said Walter, who seemed to have anticipated these objections; "so do we. There's no fear of our smuggling so much as an ounce of tobacco for the future; and, where we are going, we could not if we would. But there's no time for parleying, you foolish child! I told you just now that every moment is precious."

"Then go by yourself!" she answered, with a determination that equaled his own, and her eyes flashed into his. "I have no fancy for your company since poor Christian went out with you, and never returned."

"Do you mean to say you have never guessed where Christian was?" inquired Walter.

She looked up at him, with pitiful, pleading eyes.

"Oh, Walter, you wouldn't be so cruel as to deceive me?"

"Deceive you! Of course not. What would be the use? Christian was in our way here, as he had taken to prying about. What's more, he'd come just at an inconvenient time, when we didn't want any one in the house who wasn't a very sound sleeper. The first night he came he would have found out everything if we hadn't taken the precaution of locking his door outside; and, therefore, as we couldn't scare him away, we thought it advisable to take him away. The Saucy Sally was unloaded by this time, and so we made him our prisoner for the nonce. But I don't see why we shouldn't all sup together in peace and amity to-night, if you'll only make a little haste."

To see Christian again, Mabel would have gone to the very brink of the grave; therefore, the sacrifice Walter demanded of her seemed small, indeed, in comparison with the gain. She darted into the hall, caught a mantle and her garden hat off the settee, and joined Walter in a few seconds.

Active as she was, it was with difficulty that she kept up with his quick, eager stride; but as soon as they got under the shelter of the rocks, he slackened speed a little, and said, "We shall have to bide until the evening, as father won't dare come near the shore until it is nearly dark; but we shall be snug enough in the cave, in the meantime, and I don't fancy they will find us there."

Mabel had often heard her father and brother speak of this cave. Here they always stowed away as much of the smuggled cargo of the Saucy Sally as they could, never taking anything to the house unless they were obliged; but Mabel had never known its exact situation, and was in no hurry to improve her acquaintance.

She drew back resolutely.

"I am not going there, Walter. If we are not to leave until the evening, I may as well return to the house for the little while, for Marsham will think it odd I should have deserted her so unceremoniously; and, besides, I want to get a few things I value—"

"Your trinkets and favorite books are on board," he answered; "also a few clothes. As for the rest, you must manage without, for it is quite impossible you should go back to the house."

"Why?"

"Because you will be caught if you do. It isn't likely Captain Lowe would let such a chance of revenging himself slip by; and if you were taken, we should all of us be taken, too, for father would not leave Lynton without you. You see, therefore, it would be horribly selfish of you to persist, Mabel, and send us all to prison just for the sake of gratifying a caprice."

"Marsham will think me very ungrateful," said the girl, in a resigned tone.

"She is too sensible for that. She will understand that necessity has no law; and then you are not obliged to be separated from her long. When once this affair has blown over a little, you can go where you like. We are bound for New Zealand, but we don't want you to come with us if you would rather not."

Mabel colored faintly. It would be for Christian to decide this question, she thought; for his home would be her home, his country her country from henceforth, if he so willed it; and she had little doubt of that. She answered, gravely, "We can decide all that later; but I fancy you are mistaken about Captain Lowe. For his own sake he won't tell more than he is quite obliged. A man never cares to confess that he has been duped, especially to a subordinate."

"But he must account for his not having kept his appointment. The man had orders to watch the Saucy Sally, and, of course, will

have to explain why, after having given such orders, he allowed the Saucy Sally to sail calmly out of the bay in broad daylight, before his very eyes."

"I suppose he will have to make some excuse; but I do hope he won't lose his situation, for it is all he has to depend upon."

"I don't seem to care much either one way or the other," replied Walter, carelessly. "If he allowed himself to be fooled, he must take the consequences."

"Yes; only he was fooled by us," she said, reproachfully.

"What does that matter? It was his own fault, after all, for we couldn't have done it if he hadn't let us."

"I am sure he had no idea the sherry was so strong, Walter."

"I dare say he hadn't; but when a man comes to his age, he ought to know. If I'd told him the wine was strong, he would have been very likely to think I didn't want him to drink much."

"Whereas, the more he took, the better it answered your purpose."

"Of course," answered Walter, with a callous laugh. "But here's the cave. Did you ever see anything better situated, or more closely hidden away by nature itself? One might live there for months at a time, and never be found out; only that one would not be able to light a fire except at night, as the smoke would betray us. But we were often uncommonly jolly here, for all that—Tom and I. Father got so fond of his comforts, at last, he used to grumble at the accommodation; but I'm more sorry to leave the old cave than I am to leave the Manor House."

And Walter looked about him with a certain feeling that surprised Mabel, who had never been wont to expect anything of this sort in her younger brother.

It was a rough place, too—a natural cave in the rocks, which, by the aid of art, had been made an almost impenetrable retreat, the entrance to which was so ingeniously concealed, that you might pass it fifty times a day without noticing it.

There was an extraordinary collection of miscellaneous articles in the cave; and Mabel found presently that it was possible to make a decent meal even in such a place; for Walter brought out cold fowl and ham, sherry, etc., and spread a sort of locker with the provisions, seeming rather to enjoy playing the host, Mabel thought.

The hope of seeing Christian again soon gave Mabel an appetite, and she did full justice to the good fare, to Walter's evident gratification.

"You can amuse yourself turning over those things," he said, when she had finished; "or there are books. We sha'n't be able to move from here until nine o'clock."

"I know that," she answered; but somehow the time did not seem long, for she had Hope for a companion, and, moreover, Walter came out strong under difficulties, and was actually amiable.

Perhaps the wild excitement and danger of the life he had led had made him nervous and irritable, and that it was a real relief to him to feel that the struggle was over. However this may be, Walter was quite a different person to-day to what she had ever known him to be; and she was thankful later that it should have been so, that her last memories of him might be the softest and best.

Toward sunset, the sullen roar of the sea, which had been in their ears all day, increased to a deep boom; and Walter, who had listened anxiously for the last hour, stole out cautiously to reconnoiter. He came back looking very grave.

"I am afraid we are going to have a dirty night," he said. "But if once we can get on board the Saucy Sally, I sha'n't be afraid. She has weathered many a storm ere this, and isn't easily frightened. The only thing is that they mayn't be able to come for us."

"What then?"

Walter shrugged his shoulders.

"There would be the chicken-bones for breakfast to-morrow morning, and after that we should have to live on air until they were able to get to us. But don't be afraid. Tom is a bold sailor, and he'll get to us somehow."

"But wouldn't it be a pity to run any great risk? It might be calmer to-morrow; and we could hold out two or three days."

"I don't know," he said, dubiously; "and I'd rather not try."

Another hour passed, and then Walter went out again.

He returned more downcast than ever.

"It's blowing a gale," he said, "and the waves are mountain high. I don't see how they can come near the shore to fetch us, and we can't row out to them; the small boat would live in such a sea."

"Then we must stay where we are," answered Mabel, resignedly.

"That's all very well, but if the governor hangs about here he'll be caught, and that wouldn't exactly pay. Are you up to walking to Bexley?"

"Certainly I am. Why?"

"Because it was arranged we should go there, supposing the weather prevented them from landing on the beach. You know there is a large harbor at Bexley which you can enter in all weathers, and Tom knows it well, as we have often run in there for shelter. We'll wait another hour, and if there isn't a decided lull by that time, the sooner we start for Bexley the better."

"Very well," answered Mabel; and they did wait another hour, during which time there was no improvement in the aspect of affairs out of doors, but rather the contrary.

Then Walter, who was so unusually considerate and kind to-day that it almost frightened Mabel, it looked so like compunction, made her eat and drink, to give her strength for the long walk before her, and finally they issued forth from the cave, Mabel clinging fast to his strong arm.

The wind nearly took Mabel off her feet, but she pushed on bravely, nevertheless. Still, all the agitation and excitement of the last two or three days had weakened her unconsciously, and now and then she had to rest.

Yet Walter was patient with her all through, as she was glad to remember afterward, and the potent, fiery liquid with which he moistened her lips from time to time helped her along.

It was just striking midnight as Mabel limped into Bexley, feeling so worn out by this time that even the hope of seeing Christian had no power to stir her languid pulses.

Half-supporting, half-carrying her, Walter hurried toward the harbor; and, placing her on a seat behind the shelter of the light-house, he went back to look for the Saucy Sally.

He ran back in less than a minute, saying it was all right, and lifting Mabel in his arms, carried her on board the yacht.

They led her below among them, and she lay down in the berth prepared for her—so faint by this time she could not even think, and did not remember to wonder that she had seen nothing of Christian.

But the violent motion, and the gusts of briny air that penetrated even into the cabin, revived her after a while, and she sat upright, and tried to calmly review her position.

The Saucy Sally was a brave little vessel, but had never had such terrible odds against it as on this night, and each time it mounted the ridge of a huge wave, and then glided into the great gulf below, Mabel thought her last hour had come, and tried to pray.

But the Saucy Sally managed to right herself, staggering out of the dark depths, and pulling herself together valiantly; and then, all battered and bruised as she was, Mabel crawled up the companion-ladder, for was not any thing better than to die like a rat in a hole, without the excitement of a last battle for life to deaden the final wrench?

It wasn't in the Alsagers to be like "dumb,

driven cattle," and Mabel wanted to see the peril she could not evade, and die with the rest if she must needs die at all.

Walter was at the helm, and even in the dull light she could see the stern, set look on his handsome young face, and knew that he would fight for life inch by inch, with all the strength of his body and mind, and, when fairly beaten, die without quailing.

Mr. Alsager was on his knees, clinging to the broken mast.

Tom was behind him, lying flat on his stomach, and busy cutting the ragged sail which lashed the air like a whip, and, catching the wind, had nearly overturned them.

And Christian?

"Father," she said, in a low, plaintive voice, "Walter deceived me, did he not? Christian is dead. You need not mind telling me the truth now, when I shall join him so soon—it will make it easier to die."

Above the tumult of the waves and winds Mr. Alsager heard these appealing words, and his heart, which had grown so callous, was stirred to its depths.

He could not lie to her now, trembling as he did, on the very brink of another world, and so he answered, solemnly, "I believe the poor lad to be dead, and Heaven forgive us for the wrong we did him. It didn't seem a very great crime at the time, because he had a chance of life; but it feels like murder now, and I am afraid it will be counted as such on the day of reckoning."

The Saucy Sally gave a great lurch at this moment, and Mabel was driven against the ladder with so much force that she lay quite stunned, and mercifully unconscious of her peril.

Whatever might be the faults of the two Alsagers, it was impossible to help admiring the cool courage with which they faced their danger, and seized every advantage, however small, that came in their way. To lose their heads for a second was to lose their lives, but they were equal to the emergency, and faced it without flinching.

There was a kind of grandeur, after all, in such bravery as this, for the situation seemed so hopeless, it was hardly worth while to struggle. But, calm and wary, Walter watched every wave, and helped the Saucy Sally over them again and again by a touch on the helm, to which the little vessel still responded gallantly, although she looked a mere wreck, with her broken masts, and her few fluttering rags of sail.

They were not much better than heathens at heart those two brave, handsome lads; but perhaps the mother's prayers would be answered, after all, and they would be saved to repent, and to redeem the past. There is so much more mercy in heaven than there is upon earth. Anyhow, this we must leave, and tell only what we know.

Mabel came back to herself with a long shudder, to find Christian's eyes looking down upon her with infinite tenderness and yearning, and it seemed so improbable that it really should be he, she could only think it was a vision of her poor, aching brain, and shook her head forlornly, as she said, "Oh, no; it can't be true! They told me he was dead!"

"Who was dead, Mabel?"

"Christian!" she murmured.

"Who told you that Christian was dead?"

"My father."

"But wouldn't you rather believe Christian himself, Mabel? And he says he is alive and happy, since you are saved!"

The last clause of the sentence came so softly, no one heard it but Mabel, and she raised herself on her elbow, and turned her pale, troubled face full upon him.

"It is you, Christian?"

"I think so." (Smiling.) "But you are not to talk now—there will be plenty of time for these explanations later—and you will catch cold if you remain in your wet things. Mrs.

Barrett will take care of you, if you will let me carry you down-stairs to her cabin; and presently, when you are really better, I will, with the doctor's permission, answer any questions you may like to put to me."

"But, please, tell me where I am, Christian! And she spoke his name without hesitation now."

"You are on board the Samphire—the large ship you and I watched together from Table Rock as it sailed majestically toward the bay. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember," she answered, while a flush of deep feeling dyed the pallor of her face; and she longed to say more, only that Christian lifted her gently in his arms, and carried her below, resigning her present to Mrs. Barrett—a kind-faced, comely lady of about forty—the wife of an officer in India who was coming home to fetch her grown-up daughters, who had been educated in England.

Mrs. Barrett was as efficient as she was well intentioned, and carried out the doctor's order so skillfully that in a few hours Mabel was really better, and was allowed to see Christian, on the condition that she should not excite herself.

The storm which had risen at sunset the night before had abated at sunrise the next morning, and though the sea was swollen and turbid, and the vessel rocked uneasily, there was such a stillness in the heavy air, you could hardly realize now what the past might have been; and it all seemed like a wretched dream to Mabel until Christian came and sat beside her, and took her cold hand between his warm palms, with a caressing, protective sort of tenderness.

"You are better now, are you not?" he said, gently.

"I feel almost well; and I may ask you a few questions, Christian, may I not? I am sure it is much worse for me to be brooding over and picturing all sorts of miserable possibilities than to know the truth. I can bear any thing better than suspense."

"I am quite ready to tell the truth," he answered.

"Well, then, I want to know what has become of my father and brothers?"

Christian looked very grave.

"I can hardly tell you, Mabel, and I fear that as they have every possible reason for desiring secrecy, their fate will never be known—unless their bodies should be found later. But somehow I cannot help thinking they have escaped, for your brothers were fine sailors and bold swimmers, and I believe the Saucy Sally would float as long as there was a plank of her left."

"Did you see anything of her?"

"She drifted past us at dawn to-day; but she was some little distance off then, and we could not see if there was any one on board. But I had such a feeling about you principally, although I should have liked to save all, I got the captain to lower a boat, and rowed out with four of the men to see if there might be a chance of picking up any of you."

"And then you found me?"

"Yes. You must have been washed overboard, and the others possibly shared your fate; but being quite sensible and strong swimmers, it is equally possible that they regained the Saucy Sally. You had a life-belt on when we found you, otherwise you would have been drowned before we reached you, for you were lying like a log on the water, quite insensible from a blow on the head."

"And so they left me!" she said, distressfully.

"They could not help themselves, Mabel, and if they have survived will be as doubtful about your fate as you are about theirs."

"But they may not all three have been washed overboard, Christian."

"No; but the one who was in the Saucy Sally could not have helped the others, as there was no way of managing the little vessel by this time, and it was at the mercy of the wind

and waves. Your brothers might have swum to it, and some one have thrown them a rope; but it is not likely they would have seen you, and could not have saved you if they had."

"Perhaps not," she answered, wiping the tears from her eyes. "And they may have thought me dead already. I must have been insensible for hours."

"You shall tell me the whole history of your adventures since we parted when you are stronger, Mabel. Are you not a little curious as to what became of me that evening I went out with your brothers for a row?"

"I have heard a good deal," she answered, in a low, pained voice, "and I am sure they were very sorry afterward—my father said so, indeed;" and she repeated Mr. Alsager's regretful words. "But how were you saved? The Samphire picked you up, I suppose?"

"I swam close up to her, and shouted, and they heard me directly, and hauled me on deck. I supposed I fainted at first, but the water soon revived me, and I struck out boldly for dear life. It has never been possible to land since on account of the surf, and the Samphire was in some danger herself at one time, otherwise I should have gone to reassure you, of course, for I was vain enough to believe you would be anxious on my account."

"Anxious is scarcely the word," she answered, gravely. "I have suffered so cruelly I don't think I shall ever feel young again."

"Oh, yes, you will," he said, "for a painful impression loses its poignancy as time goes on; and you are so young yet. And then, as far as your father and brothers are concerned, you will always be able to hope that they escaped, and are leading a better life in a new land."

"I am sure if they have escaped they will lead a better life," she returned, with confidence; "and somehow I cannot believe that they have perished. The worst of the storm must have been over when you found me, and, with all their faults, the boys were brave and capable, and more at home on sea than on land. They used to practice being overturned, even in rough weather, and I have often watched them from the shore and trembled when it seems they were not really in any danger. But if they believe me to be dead, they will only be too glad to have their fate left a mystery always, and I shall never know the truth."

"In that case, Mabel, you must let me be father, brother and husband all in one," he said, lifting her hand passionately to his lips. "Do you know I began to love you that day in the railway carriage when you so nobly warned me against Lynton, and I have gone on loving you every day since better and better and more and more! Do you remember my promising you your mother's portrait for a fair equivalent?"

"Yes," she answered, blushing divinely.

"Well, I must own that I always meant to drive a hard bargain, and demand your own dear self in return, and I have not become more generous since. Rather the contrary, for I not only want you, but all your heart, my darling."

He was kneeling beside her now, and it was impossible to doubt his sincerity—his eagerness after the prize he coveted; and indeed to want her at all the daughter of a man whose sudden flight from Lynton was a tacit acknowledgment that he had been beaten by the law which he had outraged and evaded so long—was the surest proof he could give that love was his lord.

She thought it her duty to remind him of the disgrace that had fallen on her family, at which Christian laughed outright.

"Why, your family is my family," he said; and, of course, if you look at the matter in this light, I ought to apologize for the disadvantage of having no other name to offer you but the one your father and brothers bore. But it never occurred to me you would bear me any malice for that; and seriously, Mabel, dear, whatever of disgrace is fated to fall on the

Alsagers would affect me in any case as much as you, since I belong to them."

"But you are not my father's son!"

"No, thank Heaven! because in that case I could not be his daughter's husband. Now, have I disposed comfortably of your objections, darling; or shall I have to carry you off in spite of yourself? You have no protector, and I think it might easily be managed; only I have a feeling that I would rather have you as a free gift."

She turned her flushed face to him then, and there was a smile on her beautiful lips that made her fairer than ever in Christian's sight.

With an infinite gladness too deep for words, he drew her head onto his breast, and kissed her again and again in a rapture of love.

"You see that you were meant for me," he said, when he had grown a little more accustomed to his new happiness; "for we have been brought together again very strangely after our first strange meeting, and stranger parting."

"I wonder if, when my beauty is all gone, and I am growing old, you will still think you have a fair equivalent?"

"You will always be fair, Mabel, for your features are so regular that you do not depend upon coloring or smoothness of outline, as some women do; and even if you were plain, what would it matter? You would still be all the world to me—my dearest and best possession, the wife of my youth, the companion and solace to my old age. What a monster you must think me to suppose I ever could change! But you don't believe it in your heart, do you, love?"

"No," she said, laughing and blushing; "I don't think I do."

Captain Lowe kept his own counsel, being aided and abetted by the inspector, who, having spent a couple of hours at the 'Valiant Sailor,' and quitted it somewhat the worse for the landlord's strong ale, was not inclined to cast any reproach upon the gallant captain for having been similarly tempted.

Indeed, if any inquiries had been made it would have been awkward to both; and as the Alsagers had all vanished, leaving no trace behind, and nothing had been proved against them, it was just as well to keep silence.

Mabel went to fetch her belongings and Marsham, and then bade good by to the Manor House forever; and after her strange courtship settled down within the peaceful shelter of her happy married home.

She never heard of her father and brothers, but always believed they had escaped, and were living in another country under another name.

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